EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIA: EMBODYING THE 'CONNECTED SELF'

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South Asia is a complex site, a kind of imagined cultural entity intercepted with boundaries and bridges. The individuals in the region are not atomized entities but rather connected to each other in terms of something what can be called 'the connected self'. The paper attempts to understand the interface of culture, politics and development in South Asia in the contemporary context. Using a multi-disciplinary lens the paper examines the manner in which the pre-historic and historic connections in South Asia have created a unique civilizational and political history having implications for development. The role of Indian Ocean as a significant factor in world geo-politics has been explored taking South Asia as a territorial land mass constituting different nations chequered with varying degrees of ethnic aspirations and sub-nationalities. South Asia as a 'cultural other', when compared to the rest of the world, has been explored on a theoretical and methodological level.

Key Words: South Asia, History, Culture, Politics, Development, Connected Self

Introduction: Movement of people, commodities and ideas across the nations and continents have created the phenomenon of south Asia, a land of great fascination and an unending source of attraction. Thus the historical and contemporary trajectory of understanding the south Asia is deeply seated in its effort to discover the narratives and metaphors as significant heuristic prerequisite to unravel its complexity with multi-sensorial perceptivity.

Archaeology of Culture in South Asia: South Asia enjoys a strategic geographical location between Africa and East Asia, which is crucial to an understanding of human migrations, their evolution, and the overall bio-cultural diversity that existed in the World several years ago. During the Pleistocene, our hominid ancestors from Africa migrated out and returned at different points in time[1]. For more than 1.5 million years, the hominids have been the inhabitants of South Asia. Two distinctly identified hominid groups, *Homo heidelbergensis* and another group that evolved from the upper Paleolithic culture namely *Homo erectus* can be traced to the Narmada fossils[2]. The hominids arrived in South Asia around two million years ago and used the central Narmada Valley as a corridor for migrations within and across continents[3]. South Asia has been homeland for mesolithic hunter gatherers and neolithic cultivators in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Recent archaeological studies elucidate the conspicuous feature of pre-history of Bangladesh in terms of petrified wood as the raw material[4]. It is a true representation of the regions' adaptation to technological advancements in a unique manner. The fossil wood assemblages of Bangladesh have several resemblances to the tools from Tripura in north-east India as well as Myanmar suggesting a prehistoric cultural tradition of the region. Indus Valley Civilization with its surplus agriculture, maritime trade, meticulous town planning and well organised civic life flourished on a land of *sapta sindhu* during 2500 BC – 1500 BC. After Indus Valley civilization, two ancient civilizatitions flourished in this part of the world.A Branch of Indo- European from central Asia settled in Afghanistan (2000- 1200 BC) composed the hymns of Avesta, the principal text of zorastrianism in Arian language around 1800 BC. Another group of pastoral people called 'Aryan' speaking Indo-European language settled down in Punjab and composed Rig Veda around 1500 BC[5]. Indological literature such as the Manusmriti points towards existence of Aryavarta or the abode of Aryans, the initial Indo-Aryan settlement referring to the tract between Himalaya and Vindhya which extends from eastern sea to western sea. The existence of Bhrahmavarta as the abode of the learned referred to the region between river Sarawati and Drisha Dwati in North western India. However, Raymond Allchin, a leading British Archaeologist, believed Bhrahmavarta to be synonymous with Aryavarta which existed during the later Vedic period around 1100 BC[6]. However, recent genetic studies refute the neo-colonial idea that central Asia contributed massively to the gene pool in the Indian sub-continent in second millennium BC due to migration[7]. This also contests the idea that tribal groups are the remnants of aborigines of India while upper castes descended from Indo-Aryan race which immigrated much recently. The idea of Aryan invasion was deconstructed by arguing in favour of a Paleolithic origin for most of Indian populations, including upper castes.

Mobility, Connectivity and reviving Networks: The fascinating land of south Asia not only attracted several waves of population migration but also sustained their connectivity in terms of mobility through land and sea routes leading to translocation of plants, animals and cultural features. Smaller coastal societies of ancient times were often the pioneers in creating such contacts in Indian Ocean[8]. Some of the crops of the dry north western region of India such as pearl millet. Finger millet and sorghum, arrived in India, in some prehistoric era, from its place of origin in Africa[9]. Around 2000 BC, the societies inhabiting the coastal areas of south Arabia and the sea travelers from Gujarat in India were connected through an extended trading network in the India-Gulf region. The early exchange of rich spices between India and the savannahs of Africa through the Arabian Sea corridor, in some ways preceded the pepper route known for spice trade[10].

The later half of the third millennium BC witnessed maritime trade relations with countries like Bahrain, Oman and Mesopotamia which also involved the Harappan civilization[11]. The cultural continuity between the Rig Vedic Aryans and the Zorastrians of Afghanistan, both having Indo- European origin has been a matter of academic debate. The visit of Greek ambassador, Magesthenese, to the court of Chandragupta Maurya which led to the composition of his famous travelogue *Indica* is an evidence of connectivity during ancient history bewteen South Asia and Europe. Further, Ashoka'srock inscriptions (304 – 232 BC) around the grand trunk road not only consolidates the emperor's hegemonythrough the text but also connected various settlements or janapadas over1600 miles joining four regions, north west, central India, south and south east. This was the trade route from contemporary Bangladesh to Afghanistan through India. Asoka's use of maritime trade networks to send emmisories to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and different parts of Asia to spread Buddhism created a pan-Asian network of ideas. During the ancient time fishermen from southern India reached the islands of the modern Maldives and settled there. By 9th century, Maldives were ruled by a Chola king. Chola's also ruled Sri Lanka[12]. The peninsular kingdoms,between 6th and 9th century,became centres of maritime trade exporting religion along with trade goods. Pandya kings acumulated their wealth through international commerce and their maritime presence is noted in some Latin sources. They imported chinese silk and porcelain from south asia and then exported them to eastern mediterranian world. Peninsular kingdoms also exported black pepper, sandalwood and textiles. Trade links between south asia and the Arabian peninsula, the meditarranean world and east Africa expanded rapidly. Arab, Jewish, African and Indian merchants transfromed the Arabian sea into a busy centre of sea trade. Florishing agriculture and commodity production, as well as expanding netwroks of trade, attracted new invaders from central asian regions. At the same time, southern portions of the silk road were expanding overland trade in the region and connecting south asia to central and eastern asia[13].

Portuguese trade with India that began in 1499 with the discovery of a sea route linking Europe and Asia led to the export of Indian textiles and silk to the European market generating widespread interest in India among various emerging European mercantile economies. This was facilitated by sophisticated banking networks spreading from ports to other places. These bankers financed the operations of European merchant companies through loans and they also extended loans to the Mughal state and its successors. Further, the fast growing trade networks in the Indian Ocean region attracted the Chinese, Arab, Jewish and Armenian traders to Indian markets. They also linked Indian internal trade with central Asian markets[14]. In 1618, King James-I sent Sir Thomas Roe to Jahangir's court, where the Mughal emperor granted a permission to set up a warehouse in Surat, Gujarat. Thus it can be concluded that during ancient and medieval period import of spices, exotic crops and animals were regarded as luxury items and carried deeper meaning. Possession of such items conferred social prestige and religious power. But the underlying motivation for undertaking such exceptionally dangerous voyages appear to be enigmatic having meaningful link with social, political, economic or cosmological factors[15]. The idea of power and the innate desire for exotica in traditional societies were primarily associated to knowledge and everything that came from places and regions distantly located[16]. In any case, it can be rightly assumed that small maritime societies went through major transformations on account of their contacts with the outside world[17].

Ethnicity, Sub- Nationalism and Nationhood: The search for exotic is rooted in the schema of familiarity Vs novelty which is an elemental principle

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of constructing the idea of 'self' and 'other'. Since the dawn of human history, the communities have been living in group characterized by a common ancestry, culture, religion, and history with a strong sense of belonging to the same stock in a shared environment. Such are the characteristics of an ethnic group who have pursued the adventure of reaching out to the lesser known or unknown cultural practices. Expansion of the habitat for economic or political reason brings several ethnic groups together leading to either a harmonious co-existence or serious ethnic conflicts[18].

Ethnic conflicts are internal to political systems of South Asian states. The Mohajir movement in Sindh (since 1978), Pukhtun and the Baloch problems in Pakistan (since 1940s); the Chakma rebellion in Bangladesh (since 1960s); and the violent Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka (since 1950s) are some of the examples of ethnic uprisings in Indian sub-continent.Bhutan has also witnessed ethnic conflicts due to the ethnic divide between the dominant Drukpa community and the neglected Nepali community. In case of Nepal,several ethnic groups, such as the Magars, Sherpa, Newars, Gurung, Tamangs, Limbu, Rai and Tharu, prefer to consider themselves as nations because of their distinct language, religion, culture, territory and political history. Similarly, the northeastern part of India alone is home to 36 major or minor ethnic nationalist movements[19].

The question is whether the ethnic aspirations shared by different groups, large or small, have been addressed in the process of nation building. Scholars argue that when South Asia was getting decolonized after the World War-II, the template of nation states was unmindfully borrowed from the European experience which was based on the idea of a nation being carved out of a relatively homogenous population sharing a common history and a common language. According to Mishra, the history of nation building in South Asia is a saga of adaptation to *alien values and culture*[20].. In the name of modernisation, traditional values were relinquished and the values of western rationality manifested in democracy were regarded as the best options without the cultural tweak that was needed in the context of South Asia. Further, the colonial rulers proceeded with the idea of nation building on the basis of religion. When a nation state is carved out being completely oblivious to the question of ethnicity, the seeds of sub-nationalism or micro-nationalism come up challenging the common nationality. A nation, according to Anthony Giddens is a collectivity that exists within a clearly defined territory functioning under a unitary administration and being monitored both at domestic and global levels. Nationalism, he maintains, is a psychological phenomenon manifested in a strong affinity of individuals to a common set of symbols and beliefs in any existing political order[21]. Since the notion of identity remains an ever changing aspect in most parts of South Asia, aspects pertaining to nationality also continue to remain a fluid concept making it difficult for the regimes to identify and effectively control potentially threatening nationalities. Attempts on the part of the nation-states in the region to develop homogeneous traits similar to those in Western Europe, poses major challenges to the South Asian political systems.

Local Governance and Models of Development: The SAARC nations were committed to the idea of poverty alleviation in 1990s. It began with the establishment of South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation by the Heads of State of SAARC in 1992. SAARC summits held in 1993, 1995 and 1997 reiterated its commitment to eradicate poverty through people's participation and social mobilization in the process of development through decentralized administration in this region. In Pakistan, in order to transfer more powers and authority to local governments, a three-tier local government system was established in every district of the country as per a devolution plan of 2000-2001 to form an integral part of provincial administration. The purpose was to empower the marginalized citizens and to develop a new accountability of the district administration and police towards the local electorates. Besides, women, farmers, industrial workers and other minority groups have been given representation at each level of local government. In order to encourage the local community members to play more important role in the local development process, the Citizen Community Boards have also been established [22].

In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, mandates the states to hold regular elections and ensure fund transfer besides specifying various functions to the three tier of local government system namely the urban (municipalities) and rural (panchayats) for reforming the Panchayati Raj system. Similarly, the Local Self Government Act of 1999 in Nepal introduced a three tier model of local bodies with different administrative powers. However, it may be rightly held that with regard to Nepal's transition from monarchy to a federal state, the functions of the various tiers of local government and the nature of fiscal flows are gradually paving way to decentralization. Local bodies are playing a significant role in local resource management and public service delivery. Besides, popular participation in local governance has reportedly resulted in poverty reduction, women empowerment and upliftment of weaker sections of society and involvement of non-governmental organizations in various developmental initiatives. Infact, Nepal's experiment with empowerment of local communities started since 1990 when the traditional Panchayat was dissolved and village development committees (VDC) were formed by the Constitution to organize village people at local level so that a partnership between the community and the public sector of the country can be established for improved service delivery system. However, the Village Development Committees were dissolved in 2017 and they were replaced with *Gaunpalika*. Several VDCs were clustered together to form village development councils or rural municipalities. Nepal is still experimenting with the alternative pathways to empower the local communities so as to build a strong nation[23].

In Bhutan, the devolution of powers to the local bodies started in 2002. During the 9th and 10thFive-year Plan (2002 – 2013)a balance was made between the basic requirements of the *Gewogs* or the village communities and *Dzongkhags* or the territorial districts with a view to achieve devolution of decision-making process and sharing of resources. Further, Bangladesh, ever since its constitutional amendment in 1991 has been a parliamentary democracy. Articles 59 and 60 of the constitution of Bangladesh contain the provision for local self-government. The Union Parishads or the smallest rural administrative units of local governance are known for its community based system of service delivery and linkages with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) [24].

Similarly, the 13thConstitutional Amendment of Sri Lanka in 1987 called for decentralization reforms in government sector with special reference to decision making and service delivery. These reforms formed a part of an initiative for peace strategy to address the issues of ethnicity and local autonomy at a time when the civil war was at its peak. The Local bodies were connected to the provincial councils which ultimately came under the purview of centralized government structure. In Maldives, the Decentralization Act and the Local Council Election Act of 2010 are important constitutional developments pertaining to devolution of powers. The Local governance comprises of a two tier system with the atoll councils in the first tier and the island and city councils in the second tier. The local councils have power to raise revenue and also entitled to receive funds from the national government for development projects. While the Atoll councils solely manage projects in the Atoll Development Plan, the island and city councils take care of primary health care, informal and adult education, civic responsibilities such as waste disposal and infrastructure development[25].

The concept of local governance is based on the premise that for effective implementation of state policies and its greater receptivity on the ground, people's participation in the garssgroots is very vital. The nation builders realized that withour evolving the villages or the local community it is not possible to make the nation vibrant. Henry Maine identitifed Indian villages as self sufficient units while Charles Metcalfe (1832), the then Governor General of India called them as little republics. Srinivas and Shah (1960s) identifed villages as vibrant local communties constituting significant units of the region and the nation[26]. Needless to mention Anderson's (1983) idea of nation as imagined community can be well grounded through empowerment of the local communties which exist as vibrant social communties on the ground. This also helps us to understand the relationship between indiviual and collectivity. Individual is the first member of the local community through which it establishes its connectedness or its relationship with wider units. On Indian sub continent there have been many important experiments connecting local community as vibrant entities of nation. Tagore's idea of rural reconstruction emphasised on revival of cottage industries, eradication of poverty, reducing the burden of the ceremonial fund on the masses, religious harmony, creation of a group of volunteers to take care of village work such as sanitation, health, nutrition, education, health. He believed through education and motivation the destiny of Indian villages can be changed by creating a group of volunteers who are willing for self initiation and self help. In collaboration with Leonard Elmhirst (an American agriculture scientist), Tagore stared rural reconstruction in Sriniketan in 1922. Sikha-Satra and Sikha-Charcha-Bhavanas were started where the young girls and boys belonging to all castes received education and training in music, fine arts, agriculture, hygiene and sanitation using village craft. Tagore emphasized on the principle of indivisibility of an organically oriented life where work is combined with joy using game, excursions and festivals. Many secular rituals like *hala karshan'*, '*barshamangal*', '*vrikha-ropan'*, '*nabo-barsho'* were introduced in village life. Tagore also established Patisar Bank in 1905 where he

donated the prize money which he got from the Noble foundation[27].

Gandhi's idea of Swaraj meant freedom and self-rule which has to be realized at three levels, individual, community and nation. Individual needs to be educated so that they can imbibe progressive ideas and become free from all forms of oppression, domination, segregation and discrimination. At the level of nation freedom from the British rule and at the level of individual, it is Gram Swaraj or the freedom of the village where the idea of satyagraha was used as a powerful weapon to empower the peasants against the oppression of the landlords. Subsequently Gandhian idea inspired two major non-violent movements for socio-economic and political revolution was carried out in the form of Bhoodan or Gramdan movement led by Vinoba Bhave (1951)and Total Revolution movement led by Jai Prakash Narayan (1974). Gandhi's idea of swadeshi called for rejection of foreign goods and reliance on indigenous products. The hand woven Khadi through his iconic *charkha* or the spinning wheel captured the national imagination. While Gandhi emphasized political emancipation through educational advancement and economic self sufficiency, Tagore combined aesthetics, music and arts to make it more organic at the level of local communities. One of the recent experiments emphasizing the holistic and organic living of the village folk in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan comes from its ruler Singye Wangchuck in 1972.His idea of Gross Happiness Index as an innovative category to capture the level of progress and development. In 2011, a General Assembly resolution was unanimously adopted by the United Nations which was introduced by Bhutan calling for a holistic approach to promoting sustainable happiness and wellbeing. It combined good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation with happiness, wellbeing and spiritual containment so specific to the Himalayan kingdom. South Asia is marked with great diversity as far as its ethnic composition is concerned. While most of the caste and caste like groups are dispersed, the indigenous communities or tribes share a strong relationship of belongingness with the territory where they live. The state of Nagaland in India's Northeast exhibits such relationship between territory and local communities. Keeping this unique relationship in mind the concept of communitisation was introduced in 2002 with the enactment of Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act. Under this Act the government gave the ownership and management of health care, education, water supply, electricity, tourism and bio-diversity conservation to the local communities. Besides, the responsibility of elementary education was handed over to the village education committees.

Gender and Kinship in South Asia: Gender relations being a social construct exist in different forms in different cultures, necessitating a deeper understanding of the nature of cultural diversity and its relationship with women and their status/ situation in different parts of South Asia. Understanding the gender relations necessitates an understanding of the system of kinship, family and marriage. In South Asia, Kinship is an important principle of social structure. Three principle types of kinship structure provide the foundation for cultural diversity. Though south Asia is predominantly patrilineal there are pockets of matriliny in south west and north east of the region. In the south west and north east of the sub continent and presence of bilateral system in Sri Lanka. For example, (i) the *khandan/ kutumb*among the patrilineal Hindus of Nepal and India, the Muslims of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, (ii) the *taravad* among the Nayar of Kerala and the Lakshadweep Muslims, the *kpoh* (womb) among the Khasi of north east India and (iii) the bilateral kinship among the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka[28].

Understanding of women's right in landed property or lack of it contributes significantly for understanding the gender relations. The positioning of women within the domestic and politico- jural domain of kinship reveals that gender relations are in fact contested terrains where men and women negotiate conflicting preferences and divergent interest in having access to land resources. Though inheritance laws widely differ among south Asian nations, land rights are essentially male rights. However, custom still predominate the land management practices and as daughters or daughter-in-law, women's claims have little social legitimacy. During colonial rule, the customary practices associated with land rights started eroding with post colonial states coming up with new legislative measures to address it. However, the negotiating power of the women in matters pertaining to land rights is not completely absent[29]. Among the Hindus of South Asia property is transmitted patrilinealy. Traditionally, the daughters only had a right to maintenance and to gifts and goods in marriage for setting up a household in accordance with the family status. South Asian families are structured in terms of unrestricted interpersonal reciprocity where each member has tasks to perform according to his/ her abilities and deed. Relationships are intrinsically hierarchical on the basis of age, gender and generations. The super-ordinate and subordinate relationships create asymmetric reciprocities on which the unity and continuity of the family is dependent[30]. Daughters and daughter-in-laws are treated differently. Their behavior has to be oriented in a manner conforming to family honour and dignity. South Asian societies, in the twenty first century are witness to massive developments in areas pertaining to women's work force participation which is on a rise besides an emerging youth culture that is shaping the experience of new intimacies with redefined public discourses on relationship, love and companionship. The new generation is also witnessing amendments to certain existing laws (mostly repressive) and the enactment of new laws[31]. Further, the processes of globalization has lead to increased use of technology, converting domestic space as a professional space, migration and creative imagination or fulfilling the desires of the family members. The contemporary south Asian families are continuously adapting and also affected by these changes. Social science literature identifies family as a bridge between individual and nations fostering a sense of unity but at the same time it remains as an important site of oppression and inculcation of dominant values conforming the gender roles.

Within the households, unequal allocation of resources among the children by gender, rational cost benefit analysis mainly to the disadvantage of the women. While education of strengthen their job opportunities, education of their daughters enhance their value in the marriage market. According to M.N. Srinivas, if a girl gets more educated her marriage choices diminishes as following the patriarchal rule the boy has to be more educated than she is. There is also a co-relation between caste, gender and education. While the higher caste women are educated, women identified as lower castes barely have access to it. For instance, in Terai region, on international border between India and Nepal, cultural norms show a massive influence of the Hindu culture of Northern India. Terai ethnic groups, for example, are mostly seen as socially conservative especially with regard to women[32]. However, Gender relations among the hill tribes and Tibeto-Burmese groups are largely found to be comparatively more egalitarian. In case of Nepal, the Newars generally belong to the elite section who are considered to be economically, socially and politically influential. All are involved in business trade including both men and women. Women's employment in business is seen as a normative aspect seldom having any restrictions on their mobility and interactions with men Women leaders in south Asian countries have resumed power in periods of intense political crisis following the death of a close relative either father or husband. However, South Asian women as a category is heterogeneous. While the elite women assume political power, the grass women's leadership is still taking shape in South Asian countries.

Literature and Culture: The social science perspective distinguishing culture and civilization came from the writings of Robert Redfield in 1930s when the anthropological universe of study shifted from study of tribal culture to the study of peasant societies, the latter being taken as a part of the civilization. The social structure of civilization revolved around the complex interplay of the two layers of culture which Redfield called as the little tradition and the great tradition. While the former remained an oral tradition, the later revolved around the art of writing. The great tradition is the tradition of reflective few who critically engage with the cultural practices leading to elaboration and systemization of cultural items subjecting it to a philosophical scrutiny. Production of cultural text is regarded as a passage to civilization. Such texts have been vehicles to spread out lived in values, ethics and cultural essence of great tradition to different little traditions located at distant places. Historically such texts have remained religious in character, critically reflecting on the experiences of life, death and beyond. Philosophical reflections on elements of matter such as Earth, water, fire, air, and space attracted the attentions of early philosophies. The meaning of the life beyond the present world and the role of good deeds and the inner aspirations for connecting to the cosmic spirit constituted the broad framework of such writings. During ancient times several such centres of text production came up in south Asia. The Vedas were composed in North West India, Avesta, the Zoroastrian text in Afghanistan, Buddhist texts in Tibet and Sri Lanka, Hindu text in Indo-Gangetic plains and peninsular India and the oral texts of Sikhism in Punjab. In South Asian literature, the idea of the nation has been a subject of intellectual scrutiny and creative interrogation. National boundaries have been described as shadow lines, for example, luminal areas between India and Bangladesh[33] . Migration across the nation has been projected as change of the skies above but not the colour of the soul within However, in most cases South Asian literature has remained a non- migrant and a non-diasporic one. The creative writers of South Asia have used their fiction as well as non-fiction to argue that transnational interactions outside the European context provide vivid metaphor for understanding social and material asymmetry and local inequalities. Historically, several great epics

have contributed to the formation and enrichment of south Asian literature during ancient times.

Indian epics took several centuries to come to its written form and in south Asia such epics have taken a variety of theatre forms capturing the popular imagination. Example of one such literary work is a poetic version of Ramayana from South East Asia in Javanese dating from late 9th century. In Bali of Indonesia the *Wayang parwa* refers to shadow puppet theatre of depicting Mahabharata stories. It focuses on the struggle between Pandava and Kauravawith its four classes of character i.e. *dewa(*Gods*)*, *ratu (*nobles*)*, *resi (*priests*)*,and *raksasa* (demons). The old Javanese parwa texts were in fact prose works written in Sanskrit around 11th century. Subsequently, the textual form got connected to an earlier epic recitation style in Javanese. The contemporary performance of *Wayang* reflects this dual language structure of the older textual tradition. The Balinese ideas on written literature, oral performance, and dramatic norms are conditioned by the existing patterns of communication in public spheres[34].

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KAUTILYAN INFLUENCE ON INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY MAKERS - CONTINUITY, REALISM AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Rachna Srivastava

This paper examines the enduring influence of Kautilya's Arthashastra on Indian foreign policy makers from the Nehruvian era through the present day. It argues that, despite changes in ideology, institutions, and global structure, a Kautilyan strategic culture—emphasizing state survival, strategic autonomy, calibrated use of force, alliance flexibility, and the combined employment of material and moral instruments—has persisted as an implicit framework shaping policy choices. Drawing on textual analysis of the Arthashastra, secondary literature, doctrinal statements, and recent policy actions (2014–2025), the paper traces continuities and transformations in how Indian leaders operationalize Kautilyan prescriptions. The study contributes to scholarship on classical influences in modern foreign policy by combining historical tracing with contemporary case analysis (nuclearization, neighborhood policy, economic diplomacy, and maritime strategy). It concludes that Kautilyan thought functions both as intellectual resource and legitimating narrative for Indian policymakers, while remaining selectively interpreted to fit democratic and normative constraints.

Keywords: Kautilya; Arthashastra; Indian foreign policy; strategic culture; Modi doctrine; Nehru; strategic autonomy; diplomatic practice

Introduction: Kautilya (also Chanakya/Vishnugupta), author of the Arthashastra (~4th century BCE), is widely regarded in contemporary Indian strategic discourse as a foundational theorist of statecraft. His prescriptions—ranging from the Mandala Theory of interstate relations to the operational toolkit of Sama, Dana, Bheda, Danda (conciliation, gifts, division, punishment)—are frequently invoked in academic, military, and political forums to explain and justify Indian foreign-policy behavior[1]. Modern scholarship debates whether such references represent genuine doctrinal continuity or rhetorical appropriation; nonetheless, Indian foreign policy makers across regimes have repeatedly demonstrated patterns that resonate with Kautilyan realism: an abiding concern for security and material power, preference for strategic autonomy over bloc alignment, calibrated use of coercion, and use of economic and cultural instruments to achieve geopolitical ends.

This paper investigates the mechanisms and extent of Kautilya's influence on Indian foreign policy makers. It asks: How have successive Indian leaders—Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi—drawn on, adapted, or rejected Kautilyan ideas in their external conduct? What institutional and normative filters mediate the reception of the Arthashastra in democratic India? And to what degree do recent policy moves (2014–2025) exhibit explicit or implicit Kautilyan logic? Addressing these questions contributes to the literature on classical political thought's resonance in modern state behavior, and helps explain recurring strategic patterns in Indian diplomacy.

Literature Review: Two literatures provide the intellectual backdrop: (a) studies of Kautilya's Arthashastra and its modern interpretations; and (b) analyses of Indian strategic culture and foreign policy practice. Kautilya's text has been analyzed both as prescriptive manual and as descriptive compendium of statecraft. Kangle's translation and commentary remain authoritative, highlighting Kautilya's emphasis on the material foundations of power, intelligence, and flexible diplomacy[2]. Contemporary interpreters argue that the Arthashastra's Mandala logic and the Shadgunya/Saptanga frameworks offer heuristics for alliance formation and grand strategy[3]. Policy-oriented analyses frequently draw direct lines between Kautilyan categories and modern policy choices—particularly in relation to China and neighborhood policy—asserting continuity in strategic logic[4]. Recent scholarship has also explored the "reappropriation" of Kautilya by political actors in India, noting that the invocation of ancient texts can serve both analytic and legitimating functions[5]. The literature on Indian foreign policy is robust and multi-faceted. Nehru's non-alignment has been read as principled idealism and as a strategy for autonomy[6]. Indira Gandhi's era shows a more overt realist tilt—nuclearization and alliance balancing—while post-Cold War leaders adapted to globalization by integrating economic statecraft with strategic hedging[7]. Recent studies of the Modi era identify a more assertive and integrated strategy combining hard power demonstrations, diaspora outreach, and economic diplomacy[8]. Several scholars have pointed out that contemporary Indian strategic behavior—maritime engagement with Africa, multi-alignment, hedging vis-à-vis China and the U.S., and calibrated coercive responses to cross-border terrorism—bear resemblances to Kautilyan recommendations adapted to the multipolar twenty-first century. Empirical analyses of these continuities and ruptures remain an ongoing scholarly task.

Methodology: This paper employs qualitative, interpretive methodology combining (1) textual analysis of primary classical material[9] to extract core conceptual categories; (2) process-tracing of major policy choices across historical administrations to identify strategic patterns; and (3) triangulation with secondary literature, policy speeches, doctrinal documents, and contemporary reporting (2014–2025) to validate inferences about causal mechanisms. The approach seeks to balance hermeneutic sensitivity (to how policymakers invoke classical texts) with empirical examination of policy acts (e.g., force, alliances, economic initiatives, diplomatic engagements). Where contemporary events are discussed (e.g., naval deployments, diplomatic opening to Afghanistan, Kautilya-themed public events), recent reporting and expert commentary are used to provide contextual grounding.

Theoretical Framework: Extracting Kautilyan Categories: For analytical clarity, the Arthashastra's influence is operationalized through five core Kautilyan categories:

1. **Mandala Theory** — a concentric model of neighbors-as-threats and distant states-as-allies.
2. **Sama, Dana, Bheda, Danda** — a graduated diplomatic toolkit: persuasion, inducement, division, coercion.
3. **Strategic Autonomy** — counsel against permanent dependency on a single power; flexibility in alliances.
4. **Primacy of State Interest and Security** — power and preparedness (Matsya Nyaya) as central.
5. **Integration of Economic and Moral Instruments** — wealth and prestige as instruments of influence. These categories serve as lenses to read historical and contemporary Indian foreign policy actions.

Historical Trajectory: From Nehru to the 1990s Nehru and Non-Alignment: A Kautilyan Parable?: An analysis of India's foreign policy under different Prime Ministers would reveal that for India the whole of South Asia is its arena and it considers security and stability of the region as its own responsibility. For **Pt. Nehru**, the first Prime Minister and Foreign policy maker, India's neighborhood included not just South Asia but West Asia (India's term for middle-east), Central Asia and South-East Asia too. Nehru chose different policies towards India's immediate periphery and the distant Asian neighborhood. Immediately after Independence and through the initial cold war years, India sought to continue the British policy of buffer zones around India, especially to the north. It built close ties with Nepal and Bhutan in order to 'fortify Himalayan defense structure.'[10]

India under PM Nehru also sought to prevent neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka from joining military alliances with either cold war bloc and was particularly irked by Pakistan's participation in western military alliances. Former foreign secretary, J.N. Dixit writes that 'Nehru's "sense of history"and awareness that India's neighbours were critical to India's security led him to adopt this policy.'[11] Dixit argues that Nehru was aware of the asymmetry in size between India and its neighbours. He sought to reassure these smaller neighbours by attempting to build ties based on *Panchsheel* or five principles of equality, non-interference and respect for territorial integrity. International Relations scholar Werner Levi stated that when it came to India's immediate neighbours Nehru was 'very much the realist'who understood that in the Westphalia system of states national survival is the primary aim of foreign policy. For Levi interventionist and pro-active policies adopted towards Hyderabad, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Nepal demonstrate the realist aspect of Nehruvianism. The same realism can be seen in Nehru's policy towards Nepal which was strategically important for India and Nehru could not risk India's security by leaving Nepal to tilt towards China. To that extent we can see Kautilya getting reflected in Nehru.

Jawaharlal Nehru's non-alignment has frequently been cast as moral idealism. Yet a closer reading suggests a strategic logic consonant with Kautilya's counsel for autonomy. Avoiding formal bloc commitments allowed India to pursue development and defense consolidation without entanglement—akin to Kautilya's advice to avoid dependency on stronger powers while exploiting situational

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advantage[12]. Michael Edwards refers to Non-alignment as Pt. Nehru's 'doctrine of defense by friendship', a policy that appealed to Nehru on both practical and moral grounds[13]. Pt. Nehru leveraged India's ties with former colonies to create a third bloc or *mandala* of nations refusing to join either bloc during the cold war. Non alignment is perceived as application of dual policy by Nehru. Nehru's diplomatic patronage of the Global South and role in NAM illustrate a mixture of Sama and Dana—normative leadership that also served pragmatic aims of strategic freedom and international stature. Averting polarization on foreign policy gave Nehru a relatively free hand in dealing with divisive politics over domestic problems. Nehru preferred cooperation and reasoning over confrontation and conflict. K.Subrahmanyam points out that Nehru had deployed non-alignment as a tactic specifically for the cold war but it became 'a moral code of conduct'for executing foreign policy in the post-Nehru era.[14] Journalist Inder Malohotra also echoed Subrrahmanyam's views that for Nehru non-alignment was not a doctrine. It was a policy suiting our circumstances. It was also not a '*mantra* to be chanted in season and out of season.' Nehru was much aware of Kautilyan legacy and in Discovery of India we find him interpreting Kautilya in his own way. Here Nehru reflects that Chanakya or Kautilya was 'wise enough to know' his 'purpose might be defeated by means unsuited to the end'. As 'unscrupulous and rigid as Chanakya was in the pursuit of his aim, he never forgot that it was better to win over an intelligent and high-minded enemy than crush him.' Interpreting Kautilya in this way Nehru endorsed the advantages of restraint and reconciliation or *Panchsheel*, winning over an adversary carried more advantage than using coercive statecraft.[15] For Nehru defense meant purely defense against external aggression or internal disorder. This he used to justify his action in Hyderabad and Kashmir too where he said that that even Mahatma Gandhi had pointed out that people should resist aggression to the point of death. Nehru's conservative belief on use of force were prevalent even in a situation of military advantage as is evident from the case of Kashmir war in 1948 and the case of Goa. In the case of former Nehru was anxious to end the war and wrote that he did not wish to impose India's will on Pakistan. Nehru relied on Gandhian philosophy of non-violence in the case of the former. Similarly in the case of the latter, where India could have overwhelmed the Portuguese regime easily, Nehru exercised considerable restraint. Using restraint against a powerful state is Kautilyan but against a weak adversary, is not what Kautilya advocated. Was Nehru seeing a larger role for himself worldwide? Nehru had reiterated time and again that the asymmetry between India and her neighbours must be dispelled with assurance of India's peaceful and good intentions to her immediate neighbors. Nehru saw himself as the big brother in Asia and this required a reputation of conduct in South Asia (which he conceived as Indian subcontinent), a conduct which would minimize the contradiction between Indian behavior in the immediate vicinity and in the extended neighbourhood. The Arthashastra thus appears as a latent comparator rather than a direct blueprint; its influence is mediated through indigenous political cultures and institutional constraints.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, who succeeded Pt. Nehru as second prime minister, remained in office rather briefly from 1964 to 1966. As a former colleague of Nehru, Shastri did not alter Nehru's policies during his short stint. India's second war with Pakistan in 1965 was the key event during Shastri's tenure. By most accounts, Shastriji handled the war and India's foreign and defense policies extremely well though he had no foreign policy experience before becoming prime minister. Until then, domestic policies had been his forte. Tashkent Declaration signed by India and Pakistan after the 1965 war focused on good neighbourly relations, peaceful settlement of disputes, regional peace, non-interference, discouragement to hostile propaganda and confidence building measures. The armies of both countries returned to their posts. Prisoners of war were returned. Both sides agreed to return property and assets taken over during the conflict. India had gained 1,920sq.km. of Pak territory while Pakistan, 550 sq.km. This agreement was not a victor's agreement for India but a treaty between two equal states, whereas the result of the war was to its opposite. After this war, India had to bear a diplomatic setback too in the form of Pakistan sealing its alliance with China, an adversary of India. Now India had two hostile states bonding together against it, a two front strategic threat. From Kautilyan point of view the declaration was not an advantageous bargain for India. Lal Bahadur Shastri's brief tenure illustrated pragmatic restraint—a blend of moral posturing and realpolitik. His handling of the 1965 Indo-Pak War and the Tashkent Agreement underscored Kautilya's emphasis on negotiation backed by strength. Shastri's decision to expand food security and military capacity before seeking peace aligns with Kautilya's dictum that moral diplomacy must rest upon material power[16].

Indira Gandhi: Assertive Realism epitomizing Kautilyan Realism: **Indira Gandhi** became prime minister in 1966 and India's foreign policy evolved significantly under her leadership. She served from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984. Indira Gandhi brought a radical change in the foreign policy of India, by changing India 'from an idealistic player into a force to be reckoned with.'[17] Pt. Nehru's policy of peace and friendship towards all countries was continued but India's security and territorial integrity became the primary concern.[18] Indira Gandhi believed that only a stronger and more united India 'would be able to stand up to other nations.'[19] Under Indira in India's foreign policy the tilt was towards realism and power building than on increasing moral influence.[20] Indira Gandhi maintained the dual policy of Pt. Nehru with respect to championing disarmament while continuing to build India's nuclear potential. Indira Gandhi's foreign policy demonstrated a more muscular application of power. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation and the subsequent military intervention in East Pakistan (leading to the creation of Bangladesh) display Kautilya's logic and showcase the Mandala principle: her leadership in the Bangladesh Liberation War and using alliances and force when national interest and security demand it demonstrate Danda **(the calculated use of force to achieve political ends)**, while allying with a distant power to neutralize neighboring threats demonstrate Mandala. The 1974 nuclear test signals an interpretation of Kautilya's emphasis on preparedness and deterrence. Indira's decisions on Sikkim's integration and India's nuclear program (Pokhran I, 1974) reflected Kautilya's belief that a ruler must ensure sovereignty through strength[21]. These acts illustrate how Kautilyan strategies get adapted to modern imperatives of sovereignty and regional balancing. So far we can see that while Nehru and Shastri consciously tried to put before the world the Gandhian model of Indian state, they unconsciously or out of habit imbibed Kautilyan legacy too. Whereas while India under Indira still talked about the need for global peace and prosperity, what Indira sought was a 'new international economic order'where the developing countries had a say and where only a few countries –permanent members of the UN Security Council –did not determine the balance of power. Indira Gandhi was more realistic than her predecessors and used well the six-fold policy of Kautilya and his four *upayas* to tilt balance of power in favour of India which Nehru had rejected. Nehru professed an alternative of security and that was the idea of peace area and he preferred ethical statecraft emphasizing on persuasion rather than coercion. Nehru saw India as a peacemaker and for him the whole Asia was the area of influence, for Indira the Indian subcontinent was the area of influence and she conceived her role as prime minister as that of a security seeker.[22]Creation of Bangladesh & Sikkim where A Kautilyan Template was used must be studied as an example.

Rajiv Gandhi as Indira's Successor: Rajiv Gandhi highlighted the significance of the geographical, historical, religious, cultural, and ethno-linguistic connections among the different South Asian nations. He articulated the necessity for increased interactions to enhance each other's resources. Notably, Rajiv referenced Kautilya to justify SAARC, pointing out that the Arthshastra emphasized the value of having amicable neighbors. His Sri Lankan policy of deploying troops met with failure, leading to the withdrawal of the Indian peacekeeping force in 1990. Rajiv Gandhi faced challenges similar to his mother's in reconciling pragmatic realpolitik with the lofty goals of global harmony and regional collaboration. While aiming to strengthen relations with India's neighbors, he was also aware of the need to safeguard India's interests. Rajiv's policies towards Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka reflected his view that while India was willing to be camraderie with it's smaller neighbours; those neighbours also had an obligation to keep India's interest in mind. Unlike Indira he did not voice his opposition to external powers getting involved in South Asia but he still stuck to the Indira doctrine in effect. He started the process of repairing and rebuilding India -US relations both on the economic front as well as in foreign affairs. Rajiv's pragmatism was also reflected in his policy towards China. Like Nehru and Indira Rajiv saw non alignment as the alternative to military alliances and the pursuit of balance of power. He also emphasized the need for peaceful coexistence in case, as Kautilya says if loss from war is more it is better to maintain peace.

Post-Cold War Adaptations: Economic Statecraft and Hedging: The liberalization of 1991 and consequent shift toward economic diplomacy represent a Kautilyan-compatible turn: wealth as a foundation of power. P. V. Narasimha Rao's, termed by some analysts as the only Kautilyan Prime Minister, Look East (later Act East) strategy sought distant partners to bolster India's strategic depth in Asia—again invoking Mandala logic (distant partners offsetting proximate threats). Vajpayee's The Pokhran-II tests (1998) and subsequent moves to integrate with global nonproliferation architecture exhibit a dual approach: assert strength to secure deterrence while using diplomacy to mitigate costs—a modern mixing

of Danda and Dana. Dr. Manmohan Singh's 2008 India–U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement is a paradigmatic case of strategic flexibility—pursuing benefits from a major power while retaining autonomy[23].

Modi Era (2014–2025): Explicit Kautilyan Resonances: From 2014 onwards, Indian foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been characterized by a more assertive posture, integrated use of soft power, and enhanced maritime outreach. Modi's public engagements with civilizational narratives and frequent references to Kautilya-themed events indicate an explicit recuperation of ancient statecraft as part of policy rhetoric and intellectual legitimization. At the same time, policy acts—surgical strikes (2016), Balakot airstrike (2019), expanded naval exercises and capacity-building in the Indian Ocean, and active engagement in Africa—reflect Kautilyan combination of coercion and alliance-building suited to the contemporary multipolar context[24].

Recent diplomatic choices also show strategic autonomy as a guiding principle. India's hedging during the Russia–Ukraine conflict, its simultaneous deepening partnership with the United States and continued engagement with Russia and Iran, and selective recognition/engagement (e.g., upgrading the Kabul mission towards fuller diplomatic ties while stopping short of formal recognition) exemplify the Kautilyan counsel to remain flexible and opportunistic in alliances[25]. These moves underscore an operational preference for multi-alignment rather than firm bloc commitments.

Case Studies: Operationalizing Kautilya Case A: Nuclear Policy and Deterrence: Kautilya's insistence on preparedness and deterrent capability finds concrete expression in India's nuclearization trajectory. India's nuclear decisions—1974, 1998 tests—are best read as assertions of sovereignty and strategic autonomy intended to alter adversaries' calculus. Post-1998 policy, including robust command-and-control, survivability, and declaratory posture, conforms with the Arthashastra's emphasis on credible coercive capacity as a political instrument[26].

Case B: Neighborhood Policy: The Mandala Theory is visible in successive neighborhood initiatives: India's developmental assistance to Bangladesh and Bhutan; infrastructure and credit projects in Sri Lanka and Maldives; and efforts to maintain influence in Nepal. The use of economic inducements (Dana) and diplomatic outreach (Sama) alongside occasional coercive measures or public pressure reflect a calibrated application of Kautilyan tools, albeit constrained by democratic norms and reputational considerations.

Case C: Maritime Strategy and the Indian Ocean: Kautilya's attention to logistics, geography, and lines of communication maps onto India's contemporary maritime strategies. India's enhanced naval diplomacy—joint exercises, capacity-building in Indian Ocean littorals, and cooperative security initiatives—aims to secure sea lines of communication and contest extra-regional influence. Recent major naval exercises with African partners[27] showcase a Kautilyan-style effort to extend influence through maritime partnerships and demonstrate material capability.

Case D: Economic Diplomacy and Soft Power: Kautilya regarded wealth as central to state capacity. Modi-era initiatives—Make in India, outbound investment drives, Vaccine Maitri, and promotion of soft-power symbols such as International Yoga Day—represent a deliberate fusion of economic and cultural tools to build influence and legitimacy abroad. The systematic use of diasporic networks and public diplomacy resonates with the Arthashastra's advice to deploy gifts and prestige to secure allies and influence.

Mechanisms of Influence: Why Kautilya Persists: Three mechanisms explain the Arthashastra's durable relevance to policy makers:

1. Intellectual Resource and Heuristic — Kautilya provides a compact set of strategic heuristics (Mandala logic, graduated use of policy instruments) that are analytically adaptable to changing contexts. Scholars and practitioners find these heuristics useful for scenario thinking and policy design (Carnegie discussions; academic analyses).

2. Legitimation and Cultural Resonance — Invoking an ancient, indigenous strategic tradition offers political leaders a legitimating narrative for assertive policy choices in domestic and international arenas. Public events and conclaves—where leaders publicly celebrate Kautilya—amplify this legitimation (The Print coverage).

3. Institutional Uptake — Military academies, strategic studies centers, and think tanks have incorporated Kautilyan material into curricula and doctrinal debates, institutionalizing its study and increasing its policy salience. Recent scholarly publications and defense training syllabi indicate broader institutional assimilation[28].

Constraints and Misalignments: While Kautilya offers a powerful strategic grammar, its direct application faces constraints:

Democratic Accountability and Norms: The Arthashastra presumes an autocratic monarch; democratic processes, legal constraints, and public opinion limit coercive and secretive policy options. Policymakers therefore adapt Kautilya selectively to be politically feasible.

International Legal and Institutional Architecture: Norms around sovereignty, human rights, and multilateral institutions complicate a pure Kautilyan approach based on unilateral coercion.

Material Asymmetries: India's comparative capabilities—economic, technological, military—affect how closely it can pursue Kautilya's prescriptions; in some domains (e.g., maritime reach), capability gaps persist vis-à-vis competitors.

Interpretive Plurality: The Arthashastra itself is ambiguous in parts, and modern actors pick selectively from its repertoire to justify varied policies; the result is an eclectic rather than monolithic "Kautilyan" influence.

Discussion: Kautilyan Influence as a Living Tradition: The evidence suggests that Kautilya's influence on Indian foreign policy makers is best conceptualized as a living strategic tradition—-a set of conceptual resources and legitimatory narratives that policymakers draw upon when confronting specific strategic dilemmas. It does not imply a mechanical or deterministic application of ancient rules. Rather, Kautilya offers a lexicon of power politics—mandala, shadgunya, sama/dana/bheda/danda-—that policymakers and strategists translate into contemporary instruments (defense modernization, alliance management, economic statecraft, soft power projection). This interpretive flexibility explains why Kautilyan categories appear across ideological regimes: Nehru's non-alignment, Indira's assertive balancing, Vajpayee's deterrence and diplomacy, Manmohan's economic diplomacy, and Modi's assertive multi-alignment can all be read through a Kautilyan frame—albeit differently. The contemporary policy-making ecosystem (think tanks, civil-military relations, media) amplifies certain readings while dampening others, producing a selective and instrumentalized engagement with classical thought.

Conclusion: Kautilya's Arthashastra remains a salient influence on Indian foreign policy makers—not as a rigid manual but as an enduring strategic grammar. Its core prescriptions—regarding alliance calculus (Mandala), graduated diplomatic instruments (Sama, Dana, Bheda, Danda), the primacy of state interest, and the integration of economic and moral instruments—continue to shape Indian policy choices when interpreted through modern political and institutional filters. Contemporary actions (2014–2025) provide multiple instances of Kautilyan logic: maritime outreach and exercises in the Indian Ocean, multi-alignment in great-power politics, calibrated coercive responses to security threats, and the use of economic and cultural diplomacy to build influence. The implication for scholars is twofold. First, classical texts should be studied not only for historical interest but as active elements in contemporary strategic thinking. Second, analysis of strategic culture must attend to the processes by which ancient ideas are reinterpreted, institutionalized, and instrumentalized in modern democratic contexts. Future research should undertake systematic empirical studies (interviews with policymakers, curricula analyses in defense institutions, and discourse analysis of official speeches) to further unpack the causal pathways through which Kautilya shapes policy.

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CITIZENS' CHARTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Dasarathi Bhuiyan

Democracy means the government of the people, by the people, for the people. The government is elected by the people through a democratic process. It highlights the idea that ultimate power rests with the people and that the government's power is derived from them. It implies to popular sovereignty. The entire system of government is designed to serve the people. In a democratic setting, government officials are subject to public scrutiny for their actions. Furthermore, every person pays tax to the government. Even if a beggar buys a biscuit from the market, he also pays taxes. Hence, citizens are entitled to quality services in exchange for their taxes. The Citizens Charter represents a public agreement between citizens and service delivery providers concerning the quality and quantity of services. It fundamentally addresses the rights of the public and the responsibilities of agencies in ensuring the provision of adequate quality public services. This document acts as a strategy for New Public Management (NPM), resulting in a voluntarily expressed declaration by public sector agencies involved in delivering public services. It outlines the service delivery standards that they adhere to, the options available to citizens, the mechanisms for effective redressal, and other pertinent information.

Key words: democracy, government, citizens, charter, public

Introduction: Democracy is defined as the Government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Is it 'of' the people? The answer is yes. Because, the people of India gave themselves the ' constitution of India, people of India democratically elect the government. The preamble begins with the words "We the people of India..." thus clearly indicating the source of all authority of the constitution. The Constitution has been adopted, enacted and given to themselves by the people of India. It emphasizes the sovereignty of the people and the fact that all powers of government flow from the people. Is it 'by' the people? The answer to the second question is also yes. The representatives of the people i.e. members of parliament/ state legislature also elected by people. Even the representatives to local self government such as the Panchayats or the Municipal or other Local Bodies are elected by people. The president and council of ministers headed by Prime Minister is formed by the people. Is it 'For' the people? The Government at various levels and the governmental machinery as a whole are no doubt 'for' the people. But Governmental Machinery is not sufficiently responsive to the people. It is because little effort has been made either by Government or by organised groups of citizens to make the public institutions more citizens friendly. There is very little public accountability and even less transparency. People think that they do not have the power, knowledge and initiative to demand better service as also transparency and public accountability.[1] There is a need for an organised attempt to build public opinion to bring the citizen together on these issues, and to make those in authority appreciate the needs of the citizens. So what should be done is to make the Government and the Governmental Machinery really for the people? The answer lies in *Citizens' Charter.*[2]

What Is Citizens' Charter? The Citizens' Charter, when introduced in the early 1990's, represented a landmark shift in the delivery of public services. The emphasis of the Citizens' Charter is on citizens as customers of public services. The Citizens' Charter scheme in its present form was first launched in 1991 in the UK. The aim was to ensure that public services are made responsive to the citizens they serve. [3] The Citizens' Charter, in short is a set of viewpoints of the users of public services. It is intended to give more power to the citizens. The Citizen' Charter is further based on the people's right to be informed and choose for themselves. It emphasises the point that "For too long the provider has dominated, now it is the turn of the user". The main objective of citizens'' Charter is to evolve and lay down a code of conduct for the public utilities, various service providers and other governmental organisations that haw an interface with the public, so that when published as a document it can serve as a "Charter".[4] Citizen charter is a document that an organization publishes for public reference, and which provides details about the nature, working, and functions of the organization. At the same time, it also incorporates the service quality, and the time period for provision of various services, that the citizens can expect from the organization. Citizen's Charter is a government document setting out standards of service for public and private sector bodies. The Citizen's Charter is a document which articulates the commitment of government organisations towards citizens through clearly specified yardsticks.[5] In its endeavour to bring good governance It is a document which represents a systematic effort to focus on the commitment of the state/Government towards its Citizens in respects of Standard of Services, Information, Choice and Consultation, Non-discrimination and Accessibility, Grievance Redress, Courtesy and Value for Money. This also includes expectations of the state/government from the Citizen for fulfilling the commitment of the Organisation. The term 'Citizen' in the Citizen's Charter implies the clients or customers whose interests and values are addressed by the Citizen's Charter and, therefore, includes not only the citizens but also all the stakeholders, i.e., citizens, customers, clients, users, beneficiaries, other Ministries/ Departments/ Organisations, State Governments, UT Administrations etc. Various Departments/ Agencies of many State Governments and UT Administrations have brought out their Charters. More than 600 Citizen's Charters have so far been issued by Agencies/ Organisations of States/ Union Territories. [6] The Citizen's Charter is not legally enforceable and, therefore, is non-justifiable. However, it is a tool for facilitating the delivery of services to citizens with specified standards, quality and time frame etc. with commitments from the Organisation and its clients. [7]

Who Gives What In Citizens' Charter? All public institutions at different levels, whether it be the Central Government, the State Government, District Administration, Local Municipal Bodies, or the Panchayats, who deal with the public, as also the various public utilities and other organisations which provide different kinds of services to the public would be required to work out and:

- Set standards for their various services, indicating the reasonable minimum and maximum response time, or frequency of providing services, as the case may be, as far as possible in consultation with the users of the services to suit their convenience.
- Such standards should be prominently displayed and published and be readily available to the public on demand, in easily understandable local languages.
- Standards as displayed should be scrupulously adhered to and the official concerned should be held responsible and answerable for ensuring such standards,
- If services are not satisfactory, or the standards are not adhered to, without valid explanation or justification, there should be a duly notified grievance redressal procedure, indicating clearly, response time for replies to complaints with easy access to the officials concerned.

There should be transparency and easy access to information, when required, with well defined and notified display regarding who should be approached for what information. As far as possible there should be a single window disposal, instead of the citizen being pushed around. [8]

Who Gets What In Citizens' Charter?

If the 'Citizens' Charter' becomes a reality then:

- The first benefit that the Common citizen would get is the confidence that he would be heard by the "man behind the counter" - a situation which is sadly lacking today.
- The Common citizen would know that he can expect and demand courteous and efficient service with prescribed minimum standards, as a matter of right.
- If things go wrong the citizen would know what to d~ and whom to approach, for redressal of his grievances and above all he will know that he will no longer be pushed from pillar to post and full frustrated in getting his grievances redressed.
- More importantly the citizen will then be able to shed his apathy as also his passivity and fear and be able to raise his voice against mal-administration and inefficiency, as also various corrupt practices and thus become a force to be reckoned with.

Above all, he will realise that there is at last a Government which is for the people of which he can be justly proud of.

GOVERNMENT AS A PROVIDER OF SERVICE:

A Citizen's Charter is basically a set of commitments made by an organization regarding the standards of service which it delivers. [9] The need for Citi-

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zens' Charter in a democratic country is important. Citizens Charter is the public agreements between the citizens and service delivery providers that clearly codify expectations and standards in the realm of service delivery. [10] In other words, it can be defined as an understanding between the service providers and citizens pertaining to the quality and quantity of the services essentially dealing with the rights of the public and the obligations of the agencies in the direction of rendering adequate quality of public services. This serves as a strategy of New Public Management (NPM) leading to a voluntary expressed declaration by the public sector agencies indulged in rendering the public services regarding; the standards of service delivery that they subscribe to, availability of choice of citizens, mechanism available for effective redress and other related information.

The customers of the government are the citizens' for whom it exists and whom it is expected to serve. All public services are paid for by citizens, either directly or indirectly through taxes. The citizens' have therefore every right to expect high quality of service from the government with efficiently and at a reasonable cost. In regulating taxing or administering justice, these functions must be carried out in a fair, effective and civil manner. Therefore changes should be brought in the operations and functions of the Governmental Machinery at various levels.[11]

Democratic government is of the people, by the people and for the people. It is not for the benefit of those who govern in their name. Government in a democracy is the servant of the people; it is not their master. Therefore, those who govern are public servants. They hold public office only to serve the people. In a democracy, political authority flows from the people to the government, not from government to the people. Further, every citizen pays taxes. Even a beggar on the street pays tax (in the form of sales tax, excise duty etc) when he buys a piece of soap from the market. The citizens, therefore, have a right to get good services and the government is bound to provide good services to the people. In a democratic environment, government officials are account givers and most of their actions are open to public scrutiny. [12]

Public Services Delivery: Though the expansion of the capital market system and globalisation has made numerous services available in the private sector, but the State continues to be the exclusive provider of the most essential services. A fundamental responsibility of the State is to supply various public goods and services. Public Service Delivery is a composite of three words, the public, the service and the delivery. Each of these words has its distinct meaning. The word 'public' stands for the people of a definite territory within the jurisdiction of a state. The Latin root word, 'publicus', means common or ordinary people of the state. In a democratic state the people from the government. As the will of the people of a state is represented by the government of the state, the word 'public' refers to governmental activities. Therefore, the administrative activities performed by the government are called public. Public refers to the areas that require government intervention for the common good. Paul H. Appleby has distinguished public from private in terms of a political character, breadth of scope and interest and public accountability. Whereas, Peter Drucker has used elements like purpose, value, objectives, contribution to society and performance and results to distinguish between public and private sphere. The term 'Service' refers to a task, a performance or an effort. It can be characterised by intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and imperishability. [13] Service is organised activities designed to provide complete satisfaction for the target group of customers. Service has also been defined as an act or a performance offered by one party to another party but is intangible and does not have ownership of the service provided. [14] It entitles the citizens to specific service, considers the citizens as customers and empowers them to demand committed standards of service, provides a remedy for non-compliance of committed standards and makes the services citizen-oriented by ensuring that the services are driven by demands and not by supply. *Delivery* refers to the act of rendering, distributing, carrying forward, and transferring a commodity, currency, security, cash or another instrument. The composite meaning of the term 'Public Service It is a process by which government organisations like those working at the municipal level engage in furthering common services to citizens. [15] Public Service Delivery is the formal mechanism by which various services are rendered to the citizens they are entitled to. It is delivered by various government agencies like local or municipal governments, state governments, and union governments. It has also been defined as the activities that have to do with handling services by the government authority in decentralised units of government on the basis of authority conferred on them through executive resolution. Every public service involves a wide range of relationships between policy makers, implementing machinery and its citizens.

The Right to Public Services in India provides for statutory laws that guarantee time-bound delivery of various public services delivered to citizens and makes a provision of punishing the errant public servants if a deficiency in service delivery of service is observed. Public Service Delivery in India encompasses three interrelated activities: service delivery, grievance redressal, and quality in service delivery (Administrative Reform Committee, 2009). The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011, that has been introduced in Parliament, confers on every individual citizen, the right to time bound delivery of goods and services, and for redressal of grievances. Traditionally, state has been considered a passive agency for executing social policy mandated by legislation. Increasingly, however, citizens considered the government as another provider of 'services' – services for which they contribute taxes. To address this, the government must seek methods to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of its service provision. This implies delivering worth for the expenditure by improving quality of service and cutting down the expenses associated with delivering those services.

One common challenge faced by every government is how to provide services to its customers better. In India some of the current challenges that exist are; people do not receive even basic health care, unavailability of health facilities to the rural areas or to the isolated villages. The issue like inaccessibility of public transportation, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate roads, storage and distribution systems, electricity, clean water and poorly functioning public health systems. The State holds a crucial responsibility in providing essential public goods and services which guarantee a minimum standard of well-being for all who require them. It is imperative that a high quality of basic services such as health and education be provided to all citizens, since these are not only ends in themselves, but also play a critical role in enhancing individual capabilities to participate fully in the growth of the economy. [16]

Citizens are the clientele of the customers, the users of the government. The 'customer promise' is part of the integral agenda of governance for the government and sets out the standard of service that government is required to provide to its customers. Several nations have implemented changes to enhance the standard of public service delivery. Still, the need for improved services is universal, but the level of expectation differs depending on the country. Anticipated enhancements in customer satisfaction and results cover seven main areas:

1. **Speed-** The service should be delivered in the quickest manner for both the customer and the organization providing it.
2. **Engagement-** Services should be customer-centric, The manner in which services are provided should be participatory and trustworthy focusing on customer's needs
3. **Responsive-** A smart system should be established to handle any changes in meeting service standards and to make adjustments in the service delivery structure.
4. Value- The customer needs to trust that the service system is cost-effective, with value based on customer results, not company procedures.
5. **Integration-** It is important to have an integrated service delivery mechanism. The customer should not encounter a 'wrong door' policy.
6. **Choice-** There needs to be various options available for offering services, to ensure customers can choose the most suitable channel based on their specific requirements at any given time.
7. **Experience-** Customizing services is essential to guarantee that customers' experiences match what they are used to getting from private businesses.

Need of service delivery: Customers today are more aware of their rights. They possess improved knowledge to access data on public services and consequently have higher expectations of service levels. Because they have become aware of the fact that private sector organisations are providing high levels of service and other benefits, they are not prepared to accept the bad quality service from public sector organisations. They also anticipate a favorable customer experience and improved returns on the taxes they pay. Further, a number of countries have empowered citizens with 'Right to Information' legislation leading to high awareness about customer rights and, customer service. Effective governance entails ensuring justice, empowerment, employment, transparency, and the proficient delivery of services to all citizens. [17]

The government works to provide rights-based entitlements to obtain public services that are guaranteed through legislation or executive orders.[18] For introducing accountability in governance and public service delivery, scorecards, social-audits, participatory involvement for community-driven development and

an effective grievance redressal mechanism are suggested. [19]

E-Governance for Public Service Delivery: There are numerous methods in which implementing information Communication technology (ICT) within organizations can bring potential benefits. [20] The information communication technology revolution is enabling individuals to seek accountability from their authorities. For accountability to serve as an effective mechanism, a structure for assessing government effectiveness in the provision of public services is required. Citizens of different countries demand highly qualitative and timely citizen centric services from the government. Such expectations create stress on the government to perform. E-governance provides a platform for government to citizens and government to business interactions. Quality of e-governance depends on awareness level and acceptance level of stakeholders.[21] Various governments around the globe have adopted E-governance in order to encourage efficient, speedy, and transparent administration by involving citizens in the governance process and offering services tailored to their needs. The goal is to enhance the connection between the government and its service users by offering easily accessible, clear, affordable, responsible, and responsive public services through accurate documents, prompt complaint resolution, and access to government services and helpful information. [22] Government has the responsibility to ensure service quality to their citizens. Government can enhance governance service delivery by appropriate selection of location, timing, and manner with proper accessibility, cost, and effort. Though e-governance is an effective method of governance, evidence implies that the adaption of e-governance at the local level is slow.[23] It suggests that achieving successful e-governance comes with obstacles and may not be achievable in all organizational environments.

Role of Bureaucracy: The accountability of public services includes the following five elements; firstly, Administrative / Organizational Accountability. This accountability necessitates reducing the bureaucratic connection between assigned tasks and instructions followed. Second is Legal Accountability. It relates to actions in the public domain to strengthen the legislative and judicial processes. Third is the Political Accountability. In some cases elected politicians assume both political and legal responsibilities to achieve work results. Fourth is Professional Accountability. It requires professional civil servants to balance the implementation of the professional code of ethics with the interests of the community. Fifth is the Moral Accountability. The activities of public officials must be rooted in moral and ethical principles as justification for constitutional and legal documents and accepted by the public to form social norms and behavior. [24]

The connection between the bureaucracy and the citizen remains largely similar to that of the ruler and the ruled. With introduction of various welfare programmes the bureaucracy has significantly grown for enhancing the socio-economic conditions of the populace. Nevertheless, the bureaucracy has not succeeded to develop appropriate mindset in response to the public expectation. There is need to enhancing norms and standards in service provision. This necessitates a shift in the outlook of the bureaucracy, moving away from their conventional view of being a regulator in managing various services aimed at the development of the populace, to adopting a reversed position as a facilitator in ensuring access to public services for citizens, which they should be entitled to as a right. Public Service Motivation of bureaucracy consists of four factors like commitment to public values, compassion, attraction to public service, and self sacrifice. (Perry, 2000) Attraction to public service is defined as to provide service through public-administrative system. Commitment to public values can be explained as an individual's beliefs on duty for state in terms of providing services and their commitment public values. (Kim, 2010) Commitment to public values relates to help people in the society and self sacrifice is an aspect of altruistic values.

Various mechanisms: Various mechanisms have been developed to effectively and efficiently provide public services to the citizens. Some of these mechanisms are described as follows:

a) **Asset Transfer:** This process includes transferring all the assets owned by the government like land, buildings, etc. to local communities for convenient use. For instance, local theatre, local parks, and local libraries are handed over to the local communities.

b) **Commissioning Service Externally:** When the local authorities involve external providers to deliver the services. The principal service provider is the local government and agent is external/outsourcing provider. Here, the local authority exercises only partial control over the external providers,

c) **Co-Production:** It is a way of formulating and implementing a service delivery in the form of equal and reciprocal relationship among the users and the community

d) **Councils of cooperatives:** The fundamental concept behind this model of service provision is the participation of every part of a system in delivering services. It involves strong connections between service providers, service users, communities, civil society, and others.

e) **Demand Management:** Demand Management involves the forecasting and management of product and service demands in a planning model.

f) **Local Authority:** Local Authority directly provides services that were previously outsourced to be more responsive to citizens' needs, in a process known as direct delivery.

g) **Inner change:** It requires local authorities to redesign the services or activities they previously offered.

h) **Collaboration:** This is a method of providing public services where local government partners with private providers, with the local government having decision-making authority. The local authority has complete control over the project because they hold the majority of shares and a key role.

i) **Lead Authority Model:** This public service model involves government organizations operating under the direction of the parent local authority or in a hybrid form with a blend of government and private organizations. It would provide a variety of services to grow its market and collaborate with other entities, whether they are a local government or a private organization.

j) **Local Authority Trading Company:** This model is only found in the Western culture and is not currently used in India. In this framework, the local government has the power to engage itself in commerce related activities.

k) **Cooperative organizations:** Mutual and cooperative organizations operate by providing services through institutions owned and managed by their own members. It could involve the organization, employees, or the recipients themselves.

l) **Outsourcing:** It involves giving some or all functions to a third party agency while retaining control, responsibility, and ownership with the government organization.

m) **Public-Private Partnership:** this model is frequently utilized. It is commonly referred to as 'Public-Private Partnership'. In this model, the government agency collaborates with the private sector and civil society (voluntary organizations) to improve effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery.

n) **Contracts:** In this model, private companies are fully responsible for delivering services through contracts obtained through competitive bids. The private company's main focus is to provide services and make a profit.

o) **Shared Service:** At the core of this approach is the idea that multiple public organizations come together to collectively provide services. The benefit of this model is that it lowers service costs, decreases efforts, saves time, and enhances organizational performance.

p) **Social Enterprise:** This model was created with social and environmental needs in mind. In these types of delivery systems, the earnings generated from providing services are typically reinvested and allocated with consideration for social or environmental goals.

q) **Collaborative Alliance:** This is a formally established or legally recognized connection between a government entity and a private entity. The reason for establishing this type of partnership is set and focused on achieving a service delivery goal in the long term.

Provision of Services for Those in Need: The poor should be given priority because their survival depends on the delivery of public services. Decentralisation creates efficiency gains in service provision. Decentralisation has an anticipated benefit; thus, it brings decision making closer to the local people and decision-makers. The classical theorists on the benefits of decentralisation argue that local decision-makers, compared to central authorities, have access to better information on local conditions. [25] For instance, medical care might be free at a health facility, but if it is located far away, reaching it could necessitate expenses and time that the poor cannot spare. Services that require specialized or professional knowledge, such as engineering or healthcare, are also more likely to fail in such situations due to insufficient expertise among personnel serving these regions and

the absence of adequate or proper supervision. Delivering services necessitates interaction between the provider and the client, and the provider should be attuned to the needs of the populace. A considerable social distance between the underprivileged and service providers is quite prevalent. The service providers typically come from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds and earn significantly higher incomes than the individuals they assist, which contributes to a psychological divide. A language barrier may also be a factor preventing effective outreach to the poor, especially in regions populated by speakers of different languages.

Hinder the delivery of public services: Numerous barriers hinder the delivery of public services to poor in India, such as:

- **Ineffectiveness within bureaucratic systems:** Excessive bureaucracy and a tyrannical behaviour can impede the efficient provision of public services.
- **Dishonesty and corruption:** Public officials abusing their power can create a connection between themselves, contractors, and other involved parties.
- **Political interference:** decision-making can be affected by political pressures and considerations, leading to inefficiency service delivery.
- **Insufficient infrastructure:** citizens may not use e-government services due to a lack of infrastructure like electricity and basic amenities.
- **Lack of public participation:** there is absence of involvement from the public in PDS. A large number of individuals, particularly those who are poor, lack the ability to read or are not informed about governmental policies and schemes, so they are unable to demand their rightful services.
- **Ineffective policy implementation:** Delays, inaction, inability, and a failure to make policy choices can result in delays in providing services.
- **Progress in technology:** Adapting to advancing technologies like digital platforms and data analytics brings challenges in terms of infrastructure, skills development, and data security.

Components of a Citizen's Charter: A good Citizen's Charter should have the following components:-

1) Vision and Mission Statement of the Organisation
2) Details of Business transacted by the Organisation
3) Details of 'Citizens' or 'Clients'
4) Statement of services including standards, quality, time frame etc. provided to each Citizen/ Client group separately and how/ where to get the services
5) Details of Grievance Redress Mechanism and how to access it
6) Expectations from the 'Citizens' or 'Clients'
7) Additional commitments such as compensation in the event of failure of service delivery.

The Main Elements Of Citizens' Charter: Its main elements are:

Quality- a programme for improving the quality of public services

Choice- The best way to quality improvement is a choice between competing providers.

Standard- If the service is unacceptable the citizen must be told what service standards should be set.

Value- The citizen as a taxpayer has a right to expect that public services must give value for money.

Accountability- the government should be more accountable in its service.

Steps For Successful Implementation Of Citizens' Charter: A number of other steps may be suggested for successful implementation of the Citizen's Charter.

1. Providing Legal provisions to facilitate participation, transparency and organisational autonomy and to induce responsiveness in the public sector.
2. Deregulation, franchising and contracting out of services to multiple providers and public-private or public-public competition with adequate safety nets to the interest of citizens.
3. Project Level Accountability Mechanism Participation of the relevant stake holders (staff, users, citizens etc.) in the preparation, design, implementation and evaluation of projects to improve public accountability. [26]
4. User Surveys Systematic User Surveys should be resorted, to assess customer satisfaction regarding quality adequacy and other relevant dimensions of the various services and the feedback received used not only to judge the performance of the agency, but also to improve its functioning. Citizen groups consumer organisations and other NGOs should also be encouraged to provide such feedback. [27]
5. Performance Plans and Agreement Public Agencies/enterprises responsible for major investments and services should prepare annual Performance Plans that specify their goals and standards for service delivery. This will give more power to user/customer groups to demand greater accountability from the service providers.
6. User Charges for Participation User charges do not necessarily imply at such charges should be levied for cost recovery or deficit reduction. User charges on the other hand encourage individuals and other groups to demand better performance and accountability from the public agencies involved. If an agency is required to raise large part of its revenues through user fees, or its autonomy is linked to such earnings, it is likely to induce the agency to be Ignore responsive to the needs of its users.
7. Public Hearings though organised public participation is desirable, the imitative or the organised effort required for such collective action is often lacking Setting up of regulatory agencies with adequate legal backing in respect of important service which can hold public hearings on important issues, such as tariff structure etc. can strengthen public accountability through participation.
8. Information as Aid to Accountability Last but not the least, only a well informed citizen, with adequate awareness, can play an useful role in strengthening public accountability. Access to information and public education as also awareness building therefore assumes special importance in the context of Public Accountability. Both expert institutions and the media as also the NGOs play an important part in this area. [28]

The government needs to simplify regulations and policies, promote evidence-based policy decisions, and enhance the capacity of agencies overseeing public services. Local governments particularly implement participatory planning and governance systems to ensure that public services meet the needs of the people. There ought to be a clearly outlined process for addressing complaints from individuals unhappy with the quality of service they have received. Community collaboration can be successful in enhancing service delivery when community members have the ability to enforce and monitor. Political leaders must work together with all stakeholders in different agencies to ensure an appropriate working environment for everyone.

Conclusion:

Citizen's Charter is a set of standards of the users of public services. Its main objective is to find ways of overcoming the negative aspects of public services and to bring about a change in the way the government machinery functions at all levels. All public services are paid for by individuals' citizens, either directly or indirectly, through taxes. The citizens have therefore every right to expect high quality of service responsive to their needs to be provided efficiently and at a reasonable cost. Specifically, the aim of citizen's charter is to evolve and lay down a code of conduct for the public utilities, various service providers and other government organisations that have an interface with the public, so that when published as a document it can serve as "Charter". In a democracy, the government should serve the people, because they are the servants of the people. In a democratic system, power comes from individuals to the government, not the other way around. Moreover, all individuals contribute to the tax system. Even a homeless person purchasing biscuit from the market still contributes taxes. Therefore, the people have the right to receive quality services, and it is the government's duty to ensure that good services are given to the citizens. In a democracy, government officials are held accountable and their actions are subject to public scrutiny. Providing a range of goods and services to public is a fundamental duty of the government.

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INDIA'S EXTENDED NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: A STRATEGIC VISION ANCHORED IN THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE OF BHARAT

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India's foreign policy has faced turmoil regarding managing its neighbouring countries for several decades. In the present age of de-globalisation, the neighbourhood policy of India is experiencing qualitative shift, with the facet of 'Extended Neighbourhood' emerging parallely on India's foreign policy card. This extended neighbourhood comprises North eulogised by Connect Central Asia Policy, the Act West Policy in the West- Asian regions focused on Gulf countries, Maritime Policy in the South and Friendly Act East Policy focused on South-Eastern regions. The present paper argues that with the advent of emerging strategic changes, there is an utmost need to bring concern to our minds the newer foreign policy outline of these areas. The future of India's foreign policy is likely to be affected by these areas, which can also affect the fundamental principles of the former. All this dwells down to the fact that today the need to embrace the democratic spirit in India's foreign policy determinant is more critical than ever, and that is what will amplify the Voice of the People of Bharat on the global level, initiated at the level of the extended neighbourhood.

Keywords : Extended Neighbourhood, Challenges, Possibilities, Way forward

Introduction:

"Your neighbour is your natural enemy and the neighbour's neighbour is your friend". These words inscribed in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' beautifully sums up the entire philosophy of neighbouring countries in a statecraft. Following this principle our country India, as an emerging power is also affected by its neighbourhood in various aspects and on several fronts. The primacy of neighbours in the foreign policy of Bharat has been the dominant arena of interest which is deeply rooted in the country's democratic spirit, eulogized by projecting the voice of its people. India, being significantly large in geographical size and demography tends to maintain a stable relationship with its neighbours with whom it shares a profit-loss relation. This comprises of immediate neighbourhood in which countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and China comes; the other being extended neighbourhood which comprises of countries in the Indian Ocean region, South-East Asia, Central Asia and West Asia with which India has deep cultural contact embedded in attenuating people's voice. Focussing on Kautilya's ideas, immediate neighbourhood is termed as 'enemy' while extended neighbourhood is termed as 'friend' or 'mitra'. As a result, having a prosperous relationship with extended neighbourhood can serve as a 'trap-box' for the rivalry arising out of immediate neighbourhood every now and then. The power projection in the 'extended neighbourhood' must be through 'soft power' on cultural and ideational lines rooted in the aspirations of Bharat and its people. Tracing the idea of Kautilya where he illustrates the immediate and extended neighbourhood of a state in the form of concentric circles, starting from the immediate neighbourhood as we move beyond Southern Asia to India's extended neighbourhood, we regard our security as lying in a neighbourhood of concentric circles.[1] In its 'extended neighbourhood', it is the voice of the people of Bharat that adds a strategic dimension to the policy framework because any neighbouring relation prospers only when the interests of both countries align among themselves on a people to people basis. Strategically, extended neighbourhood areas of India have a love and hate relationship in binary terms and this has become the conceptual umbrella for India; eastwards, southwards, northwards and westwards; amidst what some have called an omnidirectional "360-degree vision" of the opportunities available to India outside South Asia.[2] There are numerous instances where India has 'extended' a hand for making a healthy relationship with its extended neighbours. Being a multicultural country, Indian diaspora is located in various parts of this extended neighbourhood countries where the prima facie interest stretches up to various fronts like culture, traditions, and most importantly all of this enlightens a strategic dimension of the policy. Energy is a particularly significant aspect of India's concern in its extended neighbourhood.[3] Also the naval power and army of India is playing a crucial role in elevating the strategic dimension of India's extended neighbourhood policy; being deployed to India's south, east and west in deliberate naval diplomacy. This also boils down in the interest of the protection of national security of India and in extension focussing on the security of Bharat and its people. Hence it can be clearly seen that the voice of the people of Bharat is the over-arching theme of India's 'extended neighbourhood policy' in the present changing scenario, which must be heightened in consonance with the strategic dimension of the foreign policy of our country. The four pillars of India's 'extended neighbourhood' policy are as follows:-

India – Central Asia relations anchored in Connect Central Asia policy in the North

Maritime Policy (SAGAR Doctrine) anchored in Indian Ocean in the South

Act East Policy anchored in South-East Asian and East-Asian countries in the East

Act West Policy in the West

India – Central Asia Relations: A Strategic Analysis

India's own push into Central Asia has been linked to Kautilya's 'mandala' (circles) logic that immediate neighbors are likely to be enemies, but states on the other side of a neighboring enemy state are likely to be allies.[4] India and Central Asia relations are standing on two pillars that are natural gas and uranium. Countries like Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are markets of natural gas and the countries near Caspian Sea have gas fields hence with these countries India has an import relation. With Uzbekistan India is engaged in mineral trade. It must be also seen that the Kashgar area which is a part of Xinjiang province of China, inhabits a significant percentage of uyghur muslims. This emerges as a conflict area with the Indian people and their voices. These muslims are demanding a separate livelihood away from China, which makes this region as a weak point for China. Hence China attempts to maintain a military presence in this region. From a strategic point, India has made two air ports in this region namely Ayni and Farkhor which brings a strategic advantage for India. Connectivity remains a crucial element of India's extended neighbourhood policy of India, and the presence of these ports help to elevate this strategic dimension embodied in Bharat and its peoples' voice. To the south of Waqan corridor comes the portion of PoK which again introduces a strategic alignment with Tajikistan. Here it must also be analysed that with Kyrgystan India shares people to people connection which underlines the importance of a cultural contact engrossed in people's voice. Central Asia being a strategic neighbour is crucial for India as a strategic access point between Europe and Asia with potential for trade, investment and growth. India and Russia share a historical strategic partnership and Central Asia acts as a channel between the two countries. India imports oil and natural gas from Central Asia and Caspian sea which has huge potential for strategic leverage. But the BRI initiative of China in Central Asia hurts the sentiments of India due to which in 2018 India and Central Asia have joined in Connect Central Asia policy which has focus on 4 C's; commerce (mineral, gas, skilled labour), community (strategic partnership between Iran and India because TAPI pipeline project is not feasible), connectivity (Chabahar port and also the INSTC corridor which is overshadowed by BRI project of China hence it must be promoted); and consular. There are also various views regarding the status of Central Asia between India and China, where India calls the Central Asian region its 'extended neighbourhood' while to China it is the 'strategic backyard'.[5] India must give special focus to Iran because through Chabahar port India can participate in the transit route. In INSTC corridor, India wants to propose to join Moscow through Bandar-Abas directly without going through the proposed route. A strategy here can be seen that Baku and Azerbaijan are supporters of Pakistan and thus to promote the voice of Indians through strategy India is not going through the channels of these countries. From Mediteranean sea the route of INSTC will traverse to Bab el Mandab (choke point) and from there to Mumbai. This if comes in practice will make India-Russia trade relations more prosperous.

Strategic Objective of India in Central Asia anchored in the Voice of the People of Bharat

- Energy Security – Tap into oil, gas resources of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan
- Connectivity – Access to Europe via INSTC, TAPI, Chabahar
- Security – Counter terrorism operation
- Balancing China – Prevent Chinese monopoly in Central Asia
- Cultural diplomacy – Revival of Silk route and Buddhism
- Multilateral Trade – SCO, UNGA Coordination

The Central Asia summit which was held in 2022 enunciated the fact that China was more interested in using the vast mineral resources of Central Asia for its own economic development and also to safeguard itself from the extremism-separatism arising out from those areas.

In contrast to this, India has a cultural relationship with Central Asia and the mentioned strategic objectives can be fulfilled only when the voice of the people of

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Bharat is heard at the global level. India and Central Asia share a deep civilizational connect which is obvious when we see that both share a deep trust for Buddhism and Sufism. Both value tenets of 'ashtangika marga' and peace in relations. The people of both areas have a mutual understanding rooted in their voices. Also, today there is a demand in Central Asia for the opening up of Indian universities so that an amalgamation of the traditions and cultures can happen originating from the level of formal knowledge among both countries. This is again an example of holding up of the voice of the people of Bharat. Diaspora engagement emerges as another point which can surely make the extended neighborhood relations among India and Central Asia achieve great heights. In this the people to people exchange is the prima facie. Central Asia must be seen as a part of extended neighbourhood and India's presence there is to promote a mutually inclusive relationship.[6] Central Asia's geo-strategic location is very crucial as it sits at the crossroads of Eurasia, which combines Europe, Russia, China, South Asia and West Asia. Hence India's presence is starting to be seen in Central Asia, as a "small but not insignificant player in New Great Game".[7] Projecting the voice of people of Bharat can surely help India to achieve a strategic advantage in Central Asia because both share a common interest for culture and traditions. In 2017-18, India and Central Asia trade was $1.48 billion and also through the diversification of its imports, Central Asia and Caspian region is expected to fulfill the energy supply demands of India. Central Asian region is geographically closer to Indian subcontinent and is of immense geopolitical and geostrategic significance.[8] This also points to the fact that strategy plays an important role in India's extended neighbourhood policy, in which Central Asian region cannot be ignored. The Central Asian student's universities are also organised in India through ICCR. Central Asia has emerged as the significant region towards India's interests & concerns, particularly in the context of its strategic relevance to India's security. With the increase of Indian workforce labour in petroleum management, the Central Asian and Caspian region would inevitably become another gulf model for India.[9] India and Central Asia can engage in the exchange of medical and educational facilities , offering of techno-logistics expertise etc. This can definitely add a strategic dimension in projecting the voice of the people of Bharat at the global level.

India – West Asia Relations : A Strategic Analysis

The term 'Middle East' connotates a colonial mindset in global politics hence India uses the term 'West Asia'. Under West Asia the major countries that come are Iran, Saudi Arabia and also the relation between Israel and Palestine. These three major areas are where the interest of India also lies and the strategic dimension of the interest locates in people's voice both in West Asia and in Bharat.

- Under the ambit of 'West Asia extended neighbourhood', India share relationship with 4 areas:-
- Iran
- Gulf Cooperation Council
- Turkey
- Israel-Palestine

Iran exhibits the tendency of a deep state. The Gulf Cooperation Council encompasses countries like Saudi Arab, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman which are strategically crucial for energy security for India. Earlier there was 25% dependency of India on these countries for energy but after 2022 this has lessened to 17% as today India is engaging more with Russia than West Asia. Hence, a need arises to uphold the strategic partnership between India and West Asia which is possible through projecting the voice of the people of Bharat. The GCC countries have reserves of crude oil and also this region houses a huge amount of youth Indian diaspora. Turkey calls India as a friend but calls Pak as a brother. Turkey can act as a balance of power nation in UN for India. This is exemplified by the fact the India is demanding a permanent membership in UN.

In the context of Israel and Palestine war it must be noted that India has till now not designated Hamas as a terror group. Also, India balances both Israel and Palestine separately because it does not takes side attributed to the fact that voice of the people of India demands a mutual and comprehensive relation among its neighbours in the extended region without engaging in the local conflict. India has reaffirmed its support for a '2 state solution' where it asks that a viable state of Palestine must exist alongside Israel and both must be in a peaceful relationship. This is evident in the 'De-hyphenation Policy' of India that emerged in 2015. The I2U2 (Israel-India-UAE-US) group is also called as 'western QUAD' which is significant in many ways. It enhances security cooperation among the 4 nations. It demands a collective support among the participants for enhancement of biotechnology, food security and working together against global crisis like climate change. This is only possible when the minds and voice of latter areas are joined in consonance with that of Bharat, thereby projecting itself as a strategic ball in the level playing field of extended neighbourhood.

Attention must be drawn to the fact that Indian diaspora in the Gulf are mainly the unskilled labours working for their 'blue collar jobs'. In 2022, they amounted to nearly $90 billion remittances. This readily points to the fact that their accountability is for their own country. It validates again the fact that this extended neighbourhood policy is envisioned in the voice of the people of Bharat.

- Strategic Objective of India in West Asia anchored in the Voice of the People of Bharat
- Energy Security – Presence of oil and gas
- Maritime trade via Indian Ocean and Red Sea
- Diaspora connections
- Strategic security dimension

Before 2014, the relations between India and West Asia were more of a 'passive neutrality' but afterwards it changed into active balancing. This active balancing points to the fact that there is presence of the voices of Indians and their counterparts in this relationship.

INDIA – IRAN

India's links with Iran emerged in the 1990's and are officially enshrined in their joint 2003 'New Delhi Declaration and Road Map to Strategic Cooperation'. India and Iran share a deep friendship that is anchored in the voice of both the countries' people. Having share their voice on a mutual level help to make a strong bond between the two countries. Iran has a strategic significance for India on a number of levels :-

Energy Security – Iran is a major oil supplier to India

Chabahar Port – Acts as a counter to Gwadar port which is a joint venture of China and Pakistan

Connectivity – The INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) serves as a strategic connectivity link

Regional Stability – Iran acts as a natural regional stabiliser for Afghanistan, Syria and broader West Asia

India and Iran have shared geo-political interests in the pursuit of which this part of Asia can be knit into networks of economic cooperation with increasing stability consequence.[11] This can be elevated if the joint voices of citizenry of both countries are assimilated. The strategic importance of Iran also is seen as it gives India sea and land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

INDIA – ISRAEL

Post 1992, full diplomatic ties between India and Israel were established and the year of 2014 saw the beginning of strategic relationship between the two countries. Both became strategic partners. The 4 pillars of India and Israel relationship are Defence, Agriculture, Cyber security and Water. In the year 2022, the already discussed group I2U2 came into being which enhanced strategic and economic cooperation between India and Israel. Both countries in 2024 were participants in the G2G Defence framework agreements which had a strategic significance as it focussed on AI and precision farming. In 2025, India and Israel participated in Joint Startup innovation summit in Bengaluru with focus on cybersecurity strategic technology and 'Youth Diplomacy'. This shows that though both countries are natural friends even then they recognize the need for a people-to-people connection on a strategic level. The voice of the people of Bharat has a very crucial place in enhancing their partnership because the interests of both countries align on several fronts.

INDIA – GULF RELATIONS

Around 9 million Indian diaspora live in the Gulf region. The Gulf region comprises of countries like UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. The Riyadh Declaration in 2010 marks the beginning of India – Saudi Arabia strategic dialogue. This includes or shows an element of cultural affinity among the two countries that is anchored in the voices of both Bharat and Saudia Arabia. Any joint declaration among two countries shows that both of them share a strategic interest which can only be seen when this is rooted in the voices of both countries. Hence, extended neighbourhood policy of India readily shows that this vision is anchored in the voice of the people of the former country and that of the 'People of Bharat'. In 2022, the strategic dialogue between India and GCC was revived. An important care must be taken in the sense that the internal matters of GCC should be resolved through constructive dialogue and peaceful negotiations.[12] India is a member of Joint Military exercises 'Zayed Talwar' with

UAE, also with Saudi Arab it is engaged in joint military exercises, with Qatar it shares intelligence and with Oman India is engaged in joint military exercise 'Al Najah' at the Duqm military area. In 2025, talks are going to be held in Qatar and Oman with India in which emphasis is going to be on blue economy and maritime dialogue talks.

The strategic vision of India in the above-mentioned countries can be seen on various fronts with how voice of people of Bharat is embedded in this. The major concern for India is the safety and welfare of the labour diaspora in these countries. This is anchored when their voice is heard and their pressing needs are resolved by India through the tenets of its extended neighbourhood policy in that region. Also, these countries are responsible for remittances to India. Another dimension in which the voice of the people of Bharat is seen to be embedded is the face card of 'Cultural Diplomacy' which emphasizes on yoga. India always shares a public sentiment for the crisis in Middle East and Gulf region. In the present changing global scenario, West Asia can help to shatter the anti-Indian goals of Pakistan which can be initiated by listening to the voice of the people of Bharat.

India's Act East Policy : A Strategic Analysis

After the disintegration of USSR in 1991 due to unexpected response from public with respect to the reforms of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, a new era began to emerge on the facets of the global card. The Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation reforms majorly brought a big change in the market economy and in the international scenario. India had been a supporter of the USSR bloc and after latter's disintegration when Russia emerged as a major power, from then till now India and Russia both share a strong partnership. In the continuation of this historical backdrop, India also brought its 'Act East' policy in 1991 under the leadership of P.V. Narsimha Rao which had its focus on the ASEAN countries. Under the 'Act East' policy, India strives to maintain a people to people contact with the countries of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines and Brunei. All these countries share a cultural contact with India which is attributed to the fact that through many cultural festivals and programmes, the voice of Bharat and the corresponding country is assimilated together in a rich blend of tradition under the ambit of 'extended neighbourhood'. The recent new phase of Act East policy is characterized by an expanded definition of 'East', whereby in talk of the extended neighbourhood it certainly is all the countries including Australia and New Zealand, all the countries of East Asia.[13]

India's 'Look East' policy was formally announced in the early 1990's.[14] Its main focus was to renew political contacts and to develop better relations with ASEAN member states. A strategic dimension can be seen here is that this was aimed at an enhanced proximity with the member states which ultimately found its place in the voice of the people of Bharat and the ASEAN countries. This "Look East" policy was transformed in "Act East" policy in 2014-15 with a more expanded arena of strategic importance, in the sense that the Look East policy reformed with a strategic orientation in the form of Act East policy which acquired a relevant dimension. Moreover, a strategic shift is seen from the ASEAN countries to the East-Asian countries, the only problem in which is the rising assertiveness of China in the Pacific Ocean. India under its 'Act East' policy aims to deepen the strategic element with other extended neighbouring countries by defense ties e.g., joint military exercises of India and ASEAN countries. India also aims to expand the territory of its 'Act East' policy upto South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Australia and the wider Indo-Pacific. Hence the 'Act East' policy becomes the 'extended' version of the Look East policy and altogether it projects the voice of the people of Bharat.

Strategic Objective of India in its Act East policy anchored in the Voice of the People of Bharat[15]

A different sort of extended neighbourhood is encountered eastwards, where general trade is more evident alongside energy and military nuances, wrapped up evocation of historical and cultural links. ASEAN countries offer a new market to India and also the strait of Malacca is a vital maritime chokepoint for India's trade, security and strategic influence in the Indo – Pacific region. It must be also noted here for future reference that the Intra-ASEAN regional trade is 25% while that of the SAARC countries is merely ~5%. The role of people in the North-Eastern region is central to the implementation of Act East policy.[16] This shows that the Act East policy of India offers a safe haven to the voice of the people of Bharat on an economic parameter.

The determining 4C's of this policy are Commerce, Culture, Connectivity and Capacity building that are inherently embedded in projecting the voice of the people of India on the aforementioned parameters. This corresponds to the idea of "One Vision, One Identity, One Community"

Another strategic dimension comes to our attention when we focus on security and defense areas. India has expanded its domain from South-East Asia to the Asia-Pacific region which is grounded in elevating the voice of Indians in their extended neighbourhood

The strategic significance of South China Sea cannot be ignored which is bordered by China and Taiwan to the North, the Indo – Chinese peninsula (including Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore) to the West, Indonesia and Brunei to the South and the Philippines to the East. Also, the inputs from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSS) tells us that 80% of the global trade by volume and 70% by value is transported by sea, with 62% of it passing through Asia and 1/3 of global shipping moving through the South China Sea

India's stance has always been a peaceful one and an ASEAN-centric approach. This readily paves a way for a democratic rule based order rooted in the voice of the people of Bharat. India's promotion of soft power in the region has occurred through cultural events, tourism and assisting Southeast Asian countries in renovating temples[17]

India under the ambit of its strategic partnership with its 'extended neighbourhood' is always prepared for any kind of eventuality situation for the sake of 'deterrence' and this corresponds to maintaining a peaceful status-quo by enhancing a democratic spirit envisaged in the people's voice of Bharat

India is engaged in multilateral exercises like 'Dharma Guardian' and 'Malabar' with Japan. This can project the voice of people of Bharat more than it can do with respect to Australia because India and Japan are natural ally. On the other hand India and Australia relationship is also elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the domain of maritime awareness

India and its extended neighbourhood in the 'Act East' policy have their relations located in the cultural roots of people to people contact, and a reverence to the ideas of Buddhism, lessons from Ramayana etc. In this the diplomacy heralded by the civil society groups also find a place. The voice of people anchors the fact that under the extended neighbourhood policy primacy has been given to the freedom of navigation and overflight. There is an equality of all nations and the Indian cultural centres located at Jakarta, Bali, Kualalumpur, Lautoka etc. enhance the spirit of cohesiveness which find a place in the voice of the people of Bharat and the countries of ASEAN in the Eastern regions. Singapore and Malaysia are the top destinations for sending remittances back home. Also the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project has been proposed to actively function from Kolkata seaport to Sittwe seaport in Myanmar which offers a route for goods transport.

Hence the branch of 'extended neighbourhood' policy of India in its eastern regions is mainly embedded in deep cultural diplomacy envisioned by hearing the voice of the people of Bharat. The "ACT EAST" policy of India highlights the voice of the people of Bharat on an international level by strengthening cultural, economic and strategic ties between Northeast India and Southeast Asia through local heritage and people's participation.

INDIA'S MARITIME POLICY : A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

In 1982, around 150 countries signed on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to determine the boundary distinguishing the boundary region, which became applicable in 1994. India demarcates the condition that up to 1 nautical mile or 12 km the territorial waters will come under the jurisdiction of Bharat. Hence the security dimension of India's maritime policy is a vital component of India's 'extended neighbourhood policy'.

Control of the Indian Ocean is vital to India's maritime security.[18] This control further can build up a strong image of India in the maritime region. Under the grand strategic strategy of the maritime security of India, the Indo-Pacific strategy, SAGAR doctrine (Security And Growth for All in the Region) and the cooperation under the Indian Ocean Rim Association play a crucial role. In the year of 2020, India through its maritime assistance provided relief to many Covid affected areas under the "Mission Sagar". Also, India also is engaged in the Malabar naval exercise with the QUAD partnership which adds a strategic touch to its policy. India shares strategic partnerships with many countries like UK, France, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka.

India through its maritime policy seeks to advance cooperation in the Indian Ocean region and this approach resonates with the principle of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", positioning India as a responsible stakeholder rather than a hegemonic power.[19] Through the Maritime Silk Route, China has been exerting its influence in the Indian Ocean Region. This is a double – edged sword as they have

commercial and military implications in their 'String of Pearls' strategy. Hence, India's extended neighbourhood strategic frontiers acts into China's own backyard in Central Asia and South – East Asia, where both aim to project their power in the Indian Ocean. Strategically, India's extended neighbourhood vision show a balanced view with respect to the Indo-Pacific region and maritime security. The launch of MAHASAGAR, which broadens SAGAR's scope globally, highlights India's ambition to lead the Global South while fostering multipolarity.[20]

Strategic Objective of India in its Maritime Policy anchored in the Voice of the People of Bharat

A southerly implementation of India's extended neighbourhood drive has become well established throughout much of the Indian Ocean and its littoral, where India's strategic "footprint" is becoming noticeable.[21] One of the key feature of the maritime policy of India is that India has focused on creating ethical, inclusive connectivity models, in contrast with exploitative debt – driven models which we see in the One Belt One Road initiative of China. Also, the SAGAR doctrine encompasses within its program providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in regional crises, rescue missions and providing medical supplies during natural disasters and conflicts. An example of this can be seen when during the COVID-19 pandemic, India provided a large consignment of drugs and other medical supplies to the people of Sri Lanka through the indian navy ship Gharial.[22]

Bharat and its people's voice is exemplified at various levels under the ambit of maritime policy in the extended neighbourhood which can be seen under various arenas as follows:-

The SAGAR and MAHASAGAR doctrines are rooted in the deep civilizational ethos and cultural contact of Bharat and its people with the Global South which seeks a more integrated and cooperative future towards sustainable development for all19

India opposes unilateral actions and supports a multilateral approach in promoting the freedom of navigation and establishing a rule based order under UNCLOS

Various platforms like QUAD, IORA, IPOI etc. ensure that the voice of people of Bharat is anchored in the Indo-Pacific region which provides a stability to the maritime domain of 'extended neighbourhood'

Various projects like Project Mausam reconnects the ancient maritime networks of India on a cultural ground, for e.g., the Sabang Port connects India with Indonesia which echoes the ties between two countries dating back to the Chola era

The Coastal Communities act as first stakeholders directly interacting with the oceanic and maritime spaces. For e.g., the fisherfolk exchanges between India and Sri Lanka have been instrumental in resolving the Palk Bay fishing disputes

Maritime policy anchors within itself a deep concern for underwater environment and its species. It resonates with the safeguarding of maritime ecology

Through the programme of its Maritime policy, India has garnered an 'extended neighbourhood goodwill' by initiating humanitarian relief measures for tsunami stricken areas

Today, US is also striving to make a positive connection with India and is starting to acknowledge the role of India in the Indian Ocean Region, and this fact is reaffirmed by the words of US Secretary of Navy Donald Winter when he said that India's arrival in this region promises to maintain the strategic security of this region.[23]

Voice Of The People Of Bharat As Bedrock For Reaffirming Strategic Leverage Of India In Its Extended Neighbourhood Policy

India's 'extended neighbourhood' policy is not merely a diplomatic stance rather it holds within itself a grand strategic vision in which it is crucial that the 'Voice of the people of Bharat' is heard. Soft power and a shared cultural contact are the two pillars for making the foundation of this vision. Being the largest demographic country in 2025, India has a rich demographic dividend which adds a silver lining in its image as a global leader. India's 'Extended Neighbourhood Policy' serves to bridge the gap between India's established role as a local immediate neighbourhood power in South Asia and its hope for becoming a global power. This reaffirms the fact that the extended neighbourhood policy is anchored in the voice of the people of Bharat by which it derives its democratic legitimacy. Also, various NGO's and trade chambers make this policy a bit more inclusive. Today 'strategic sustainability' is becoming talk of the 21st century global town and utilizing it should be the main concern of India in its 'extended neighbourhood', in which the harbinger and beacon of hope can be located not elsewhere but in the 'Voice of the People of Bharat'.

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INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY: EMERGING TRENDS INDIA'S ROLE IN SOUTH ASIAN REGIONALISM: BETWEEN SAARC AND BIMSTEC

Aishna Surin

India enjoys a pivotal position in South Asia owing to its geographical location, political stability, economic resilience and demographic potential, all of which guarantee it an advantageous position as compared to its neighbours. Thus, while fulfilling its own interests, India also has the onus of establishing peace and prosperity in its neighbourhood. In such a context, India relies on multilateral institutions to strategically cooperate with other countries in the region, the two major ones being the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). While SAARC was established to bring about regional integration in South Asia, its progress remained largely hampered due to political tensions, thereby compelling India to shift its focus towards BIMSTEC, an alternative and rather more effective platform for India to pursue its goals. This paper examines how India engages with both these institutions to address the challenges and opportunities that comes its way to retain its centrality in South Asian regionalism.

Keywords: South Asia, India, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Regionalism

Introduction: South Asia is situated in the southern subregion of Asia and includes countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In addition to these, Afghanistan and the Maldives are also seen as belonging to this region. The region is often known as the Indian subcontinent because of India's central location and size. The Indian Ocean borders it to the south, the Ganges and Indus River valleys to the east, and the Himalayan Mountain ranges to the north. Regionalism has historically been defined in the field of international relations as a process in which a group of states, ideally belonging to a certain geographical area, have a shared history, agree to abide by rules, and work together to accomplish shared objectives.[1]

However, the regional dynamics in South Asia is marked by an asymmetrical balance of power, with countries with different capacities occupying the region and among all these countries, India emerging as the sole contestant for leadership due to its privileged position, as compared to others, be it politically, economically, militarily or even culturally. Because of this, South Asian regionalism has frequently been viewed through the prism of "asymmetric regionalism," which holds that the decisions made by a dominant state influence the institutional paths of the region. In such a context, it becomes a challenge for the dominant state of the region i.e., India, to effectively utilize its capacities and transform constructively "asymmetric regionalism" into "cooperative regionalism", under which states overlook their differences and collaborate together to pursue their common interests. This is exactly where the role of regional institutions comes in as regionalism fosters multilateral cooperation through these institutions by providing a platform for countries to come together and cooperate with each other which otherwise would have been difficult. In the case of South Asia, this regionalism is made possible by multilateral institutions like the SAARC and BIMSTEC. While the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union focused on promoting economic, social, cultural, and technological development among its member states in South Asia, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional intergovernmental organization linking South Asia and Southeast Asia, serving as a bridge between the two regions, focusing on practical cooperation while avoiding bilateral disputes, thereby making it a viable alternative to the stalled SAARC. Based on the analysis of secondary data, this paper examines South Asia's contemporary regional cooperative initiatives. The first thorough attempt at South Asian regionalism being the SAARC and this being followed by the BIMSTEC, seen as an effective alternative of the former which was unable to fulfil the goals for which it was originally set up. This paper explores how SAARC and BIMSTEC represent different conceptions of regional cooperation and examines India's place within these two frameworks, advancing cooperative regionalism while pursuing its geopolitical interests.

Theoretical Framework of Regionalism: With the coming of globalisation, the reality of the international system which largely thrives on interdependency, be it economic, social and even military interdependence among states, has become quite apparent wherein to survive and develop, the sovereign states cannot afford to isolate itself from global affairs. In these circumstances, there has been a remarkable expansion in both the number and scope of regional institutions over the past century and this has consequently sparked substantial scholarly interest in the study of regionalism. In the most basic sense, regionalism can be defined as a continuous process of promoting cordial inter-state relations which is made possible through the regional institutions. The term 'regionalism' comes from the root word 'region' which Nye describes as "a group of states linked together by both a geographical relationship and a degree of mutual interdependence".[2] However, the notion of a region could be broadened to include similarities, interactions, and, thus, the potential for collaboration. Consequently, regionalism refers to a policy in which states and nonstate actors collaborate and coordinate their efforts within a certain region. It entails a wide range of actions taken by these actors to improve their social, political, cultural, or economic ties. Regionalism not only facilitates multilateral cooperation but also helps member states to grow in several sectors, including trade, investment, education, governance, and democracy. According to Paul, the architecture of regionalism rests upon three major pillars: political harmony, economic interdependence and a shared regional identity. A neglect of either of these leads to a discrepancy between the expected benefits and the actual outcomes.[3]

The prominent theories of international relations such as neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism provide differing viewpoints regarding the origins, development, results, and impacts of regionalism.[4] Neorealism acknowledges that the international system is anarchic with no overarching authority above the states hence regionalism emerges as a strategic tool for states to form alliances in order to protect their national interests or balance power against rivals. This type of cooperation however is temporary and limited, because states ultimately compete for power. India's participation in SAARC represents a neorealist approach if we see it as a means to balance Pakistan's influence or counter China's expanding presence in South Asia. Neoliberal institutionalism, on the contrary, holds that even in an anarchic system, cooperation is possible through institutions and observance of rules. According to this school, states join these institutions to achieve collective gains, for the maintenance of regional cooperation and the building of a peaceful regional order. India's engagement in BIMSTEC reflects a neoliberal institutionalist approach which India uses to promote regional development using economic cooperation and connectivity. While the theory of constructivism holds that international politics is not just determined by material strength but it is also shaped by ideas, identities, norms, and social interactions. In this sense, regionalism depends on shared identity and values - for example, "South Asian identity" or "Bay of Bengal community". However, Chakma believes that none of these Western-oriented theories fully capture the unique nature of South Asian regionalism, which is deeply influenced by historical legacies, domestic politics, and the Indo-centric power structure. As a result, he describes South Asian regionalism as a case of "developmental regionalism" which is not political or security-oriented, but rather driven by developmental objectives. It aspires to promote economic and social progress in the region but remains limited by political rivalry, security prioritization, and weak institutionalization.[5] Even in such a challenging circumstance, India plays a key role in making regional cooperation work in South Asia where due to its size, influence, and resources, India's participation is essential for regional organizations like the SAARC and BIMSTEC to succeed.[6] As part of its evolving foreign policy and strategic goals, this paper contends that India's participation in South Asian regionalism indicates a change from SAARC's constraints to BIMSTEC's opportunities.

India and SAARC: The proposal for the creation of a regional organization for cooperation in South Asia, akin to that of South East Asia, was initiated by Bangladesh in the late 1970s. After several years of diplomacy led by the then Bangladeshi President, Zia-Ur-Rehman, who convinced his neighbours about their similarities which could be a solid foundation for regional cooperation among them, the SAARC was formally established at the first ever summit of the seven South Asian states – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – in Dhaka on December 8, 1985.[7] This membership was expanded further after Afghanistan joined the organisation in 2008, thereby making it the only regional organisation that unites all the eight South Asian states. Given their precarious bilateral ties and unwavering positions on national security and sovereignty, the members decided it would be better to work together in non-controversial, non-political, and non-interfering but mutually advantageous

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sectors. Ideally, SAARC offers its members a level ground for diplomacy because outside SAARC, the states of South Asia are asymmetrical powers, and this puts them in an adverse position to engage with India.[8] And when it comes to India, SAARC's success is of interest to India because in the words of Muni, "a dead SAARC at India's behest will only make India's Neighbourhood Policy more complex and its international image more unappealing".[9]

As a result, India has played a leading role in SAARC since its inception. It has consistently advanced the idea of regional cooperation being the most influential and economically significant nation in South Asia. India's approach to other South Asian countries is based on a consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented approach while focussing on delivering benefits like greater connectivity, improved infrastructure, stronger development cooperation in various sectors area, security and broader people-to-people contacts.[10]

To achieve this, India supports a number of SAARC initiatives aimed at fostering deeper collaboration in a range of areas such as in disaster management (hosting the SAARC Disaster Management Centre), education (established the South Asian University in New Delhi), health (developed SAARC COVID19 Information Exchange Platform called COINEX), technology (launched the South Asian Satellite and extended its National Knowledge Network to SAARC countries), and finance (Currency Swap Arrangement to enhance financial cooperation). India also offers finances and technical support for various regional projects.[11]

However, even after establishing itself as a regional platform, SAARC has not been able to completely achieve its goals due to which it is also described as one of the least integrated regional organizations in the world. In the many failures of SAARC, its greatest constraint is the deep mistrust between India and Pakistan. Political tensions, particularly over Kashmir and cross-border terrorism, have repeatedly led to cancellation of summits (SAARC summit remains suspended since the 2016 Uri attack), blocking of initiatives and thus has stalled progress. Also, since the organization operates on the principle of unanimity, it allows any one member (often India or Pakistan) to veto proposals thereby creating roadblocks. Secondly, the 'Big Brother' perception also creates an obstacle where the smaller member countries being fearful of India acting as a hegemon due to its economy, military strength, and geography are reluctant to deeply integrate with it. Thirdly, SAARC has also faced obstacles in the area of security cooperation due to lack of consensus on the idea of threat among member countries, where although cross-border terrorism from Pakistan is a major cause of worry for India yet Pakistan has failed to address these concerns. Fourthly, despite SAFTA, intra-regional trade within South Asia remains quite low, i.e. at 5%, being hindered by high tariff and non-tariff barriers, poor physical connectivity, and limited market access. The combination of weak trade facilitation and distrust among members prevents SAARC from realizing its full economic potential. Fifthly, SAARC does not have any arrangement for dispute resolution or conflict mediation due to which disputes among the member countries often inhibit consensus building, thus slowing down the decision-making process. Thus, SAARC which was envisioned to achieve peace, prosperity and partnership in South Asia gets impeded by institutional flaws, political conflicts, and a lack of trust. Due to these shortcomings of SAARC and its inability to foster collaboration in South Asia, it has compelled actors in the region to look for alternatives wherein BIMSTEC is favoured as the preferable option for regional cooperation in South Asia.

India and BIMSTEC: The aspect of sub-regionalism which seeks to bring closer a select group of states without eliminating the parent bloc made an entry in South Asia with BIMSTEC.[12] Unlike SAARC, the establishment of BIMSTEC was influenced, first by the compulsion of globalisation wherein countries were looking for new economic spaces; and second, to utilise the opportunities provided by the end of Cold War which had brought in new strategic considerations.[13] In this backdrop, BIMSTEC was set up in 1997 to promote economic and social development among seven countries bordering the Bay of Bengal, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Its importance lies in the fact that it serves as the direct link between South Asian and South East Asian countries through intra-regional collaboration between the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the SAARC. Besides, it also keeps geopolitical concerns away as regional players such as China and Pakistan are not members of BIMSTEC. Over the years, BIMSTEC has gained a lot of attention from around the globe as a viable substitute for SAARC, especially due to its capacity to offer an alternate route for cooperation among the regional countries.[14] Economic and technical cooperation between South Asian and South East Asian nations has been the main objective of BIMSTEC where to improve regional collaboration among the member nations, fourteen sectors have been identified such as – transport and communication, trade, tourism, counter terrorism, etc. - with each nation being in charge of an area ensuring that every nation contributes in its own way, thereby fulfilling its guiding principle of shared prosperity through regional cooperation. BIMSTEC is beneficial for India for more than one reasons. Firstly, its composition that excludes Pakistan makes it possible for India to pursue practical cooperation without Pakistan's veto thereby making the group truly operational. Secondly, BIMSTEC aligns with India's Act East Policy giving an opportunity to connect its northeastern states with Southeast Asia through connectivity. Thirdly, BIMSTEC's emphasis on tangible sectors such as transport corridors and coastal shipping complements India's objective of prioritizing practical projects that delivers observable benefits. Lastly, BIMSTEC provides a platform for India to coordinate, on issues such as maritime cooperation and climate change, with countries situated around the Bay of Bengal region, an area of increasing strategic importance amidst the great power competition. The importance attached to BIMSTEC by India can also be seen in the words of India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, who stated that, "For India, BIMSTEC represents the convergence of its 'Neighbourhood First' Policy, the 'Act East Policy' and the 'SAGAR' vision".[15] By providing a single institutional platform, India engages with its immediate and extended neighbourhood across land and maritime domains through these three policies, thereby treating South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region as no longer distinct spheres but interconnected arenas of growth and security.

However, this organisation is not without challenges. It is confronted with problems such as funding constraints that leads to delays in project completion, infrequency of BIMSTEC summits, political instability in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Nepal affects the pace of cooperation, and several member states are also a part of other regional organisations like the SAARC and ASEAN leading to conflicting priorities. Despite these shortcomings, BIMSTEC has effectively evolved from a relatively dormant group to the primary vehicle for attaining regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region.

Comparative Analysis: SAARC versus BIMSTEC: Regionalism has become a prominent aspect of international relations in the post-Cold War era as states realize how crucial regional cooperation is to political stability, economic growth, and strategic security. In this context, SAARC and BIMSTEC are two significant organizations in South Asia that represent distinct paths of regional integration. While SAARC was established to foster cooperation among the eight South Asian countries thereby representing South Asian regionalism, BIMSTEC was founded as a transregional organisation to connect South and Southeast Asia through the Bay of Bengal region as a shared geographical and strategic link. Although both organizations aim to strengthen economic and developmental cooperation, there are notable differences in their origin, development, and future prospects. Despite its creation in 1985, way before BIMSTEC, SAARC has not been able to accomplish much as since its inception, it has been plagued by the issue of non-cooperation among members, limited progress, and bilateral disputes. BIMSTEC, on the other hand, avoids these problems and focuses on practical things due to which it is able to get tangible outcomes.

Primarily, SAARC and BIMSTEC differ based on its composition where SAARC's all-South-Asia membership includes India and Pakistan—two rivals whose bilateral tensions infiltrate the organization. BIMSTEC, on the contrary, excludes Pakistan, which removes the primary veto source that has frequently hindered SAARC, thereby allowing a more consistent engagement. This structural difference has great implications for political viability: where SAARC stalls on high politics, BIMSTEC has been able to progress on low-politics, technical, and sectoral cooperation. Second, the influential position enjoyed by India in South Asia and the existing disparity between India and other member states of SAARC makes the latter feel concerned about India's hegemonic role in the region leading to mistrust and suspicion between members and ultimately making SAARC dysfunctional. But in the case of BIMSTEC, the organisation comprises two influential regional powers: India and Thailand, which reduces the fear of dominance by a single power and does not act as impediment in the working of the organisation. Third, while SAARC countries collectively host nearly 25% of the global population but intra-regional trade among member countries remains below 5% of total trade since its inception making it one of the least integrated regions in the world economically. On the other hand, BIMSTEC countries together represent about 22% of the global population, lesser than that of SAARC but intra-regional trade among the BIMSTEC member countries reached 6% in just a decade of its formation. Besides, its focus on connectivity and infrastructure projects gives it more long-term potential.

Fourth, the two organisations also vary based on their institutional mechanism. While SAARC operates through annual summits, a Council of Ministers, and a Secretariat based in Kathmandu, Nepal, however, since 2014, no SAARC summit has been held, mainly due to the India–Pakistan conflict following the 2016 Uri terror attack. The inability to hold regular meetings has paralyzed SAARC's decision-making and thereby its implementation processes. On the other hand, BIMSTEC, has a Secretariat in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with regular ministerial and technical meetings. Although slower in implementation, BIMSTEC has maintained continuity and expanded cooperation in multiple areas. Fifth, the operational mechanism of the two also differ even if they have similar developmental goals. This is because SAARC works according to consensus-based decision making, focusing on wider regional unity which consequently leads to limited implementation of plans due to lack of consensus. On the contrary, BIMSTEC emphasizes on sectoral cooperation, such as tourism, trade, etc., with flexible participation among members making it more pragmatic. As a result, BIMSTEC has achieved more tangible progress within a shorter timeframe than SAARC managed in decades.

Lastly, while SAARC represents the model of 'old regionalism' – rigid and state centric form of cooperation - being based on geographical proximity, cultural ties, and postcolonial solidarity, BIMSTEC, in comparison, represents the model of 'new regionalism' - multidimensional and flexible form of cooperation - being grounded in cross regional collaboration. Thus, the shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC encapsulates India's adaptation from political symbolism to a practical, development oriented regional integration. Even though SAARC in 1985 and BIMSTEC in 1997 were created in different domestic and international environments yet currently both are dealing with the same socio-economic challenges that transcend national boundaries, to which both have responded with quite similar plan of cooperation involving a wide range of social, political, economic and strategic issues.[16] While SAARC is said to be in a state of 'strategic coma' which is diplomatically alive but functionally dead, yet it still is symbolic of South Asian identity. And BIMSTEC has emerged as a practical and forward-looking institution that aligns well with India's strategic and economic interests. Hence, for India, it is not about choosing one between these two organisations but about balancing between identity and pragmatism.

Future Prospects: Both SAARC and BIMSTEC are unquestionably important, despite their flaws, since they have established a system that did not previously exist and because of their very presence, they perform a vital role particularly in times of difficulty in the region.[17]

If SAARC is to be revived in the future, it needs to focus on political reconciliation, with member states choosing dialogue over discord, and institutional reforms, such as bringing about a change in the SAARC Charter to allow subregional cooperation among members. Further, to strengthen itself as a platform for regional cooperation, SAARC needs to focus on developmental cooperation, collaborating on trade, public health, disaster management, and climate change. Only when it is able to accomplish these, can it fulfil its founding goal of transforming South Asia into a region of shared growth and stability. Thus, although SAARC is presented with a range of challenges yet it is not without hope as there is always a chance for renewed cooperation. The developments so far under BIMSTEC have been encouraging, however to further strengthen it, consistency can be brought in the frequency of the summits to ensure regularity in decision making; empowering BIMSTEC to be a platform for dispute resolution among the member countries; ensuring tangible results which will add to the motivation of the countries to concentrate on BIMSTEC.[18]

Most importantly, for the success of both these organisations, it is India's proactive role and sustained political will that are significant. As the largest nation in South Asia and an emerging global power, India's policies, priorities, and political relationships have shaped the functioning of both organizations, making India not only a member but a regional architect in influencing the development of South Asian and Bay of Bengal regionalism in the 21st century.

Conclusion: India's engagement with South Asian regionalism can be seen as neither a complete success nor a complete failure, instead it can be described as pragmatic, flexible and limited by structural realities. While SAARC represents the inclusive goal of South Asian cooperation but it gets held back by institutional weaknesses, BIMSTEC, on the other hand, provides India and its neighbours with a more sector-driven, operational platform that aligns with India's goals in security, connectivity, and Southeast Asian engagement. For India, strengthening regional cooperation is not only a diplomatic necessity, but also a practical strategy to bring about stability and shared prosperity in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region. In conclusion, it can be said that the ability of India to manage rivalries, reform institutions, and integrate its neighbourhood with larger Asian and global frameworks will determine its leadership in South Asian regionalism.

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BUILDING ECONOMIC BRIDGES: UAE AS A KEY PARTNER IN INDIA'S GLOBAL ASPIRATION

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Moushumi Pattnaik

United Arab Emirates (UAE) stands as a strategic partner contributing immensely to India's rise as a global economic powerhouse. Bilateral accords like 'Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)' to multilateral cooperation like 'India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)' and 'I2U2' have expedited cross-border cooperation, accelerated trade volumes and broadened market access between India and UAE. Because of its rich oil and gas reserves, cutting-edge infrastructure and progressive economic diversification, UAE is a crucial ally in India's global ambitions. The alliance is anticipated to grow through common economic objectives, geopolitical alignment and cooperative endeavours in diverse spheres like fintech and renewable energy, promoting stability and sustainable growth. The study examines the ever-evolving economic relation between India and UAE with an emphasis on how the two countries are building long lasting bridges through trade, investment and innovation. The paper will explore how UAE has become a major source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in India, bolstering digital and infrastructure initiatives. Finally, the paper attempts to delve into the major challenges and the future prospects of the relations between these two nations.

Keywords- United Arab Emirates, CEPA, I2U2, IMEC, Foreign Direct Investment

Introduction

India and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have a progressive and diversified bilateral economic relationship complementing each other's global economic aspirations. This relationship has grown stronger over the course of time which can trace its roots in the Harappan civilization (2500-2000 BCE) where both have maintained a close relationship with the historic trading networks.[1] This relationship again flourished when UAE opened its embassy in the new Delhi in 1973 and India established an embassy in Abu Dhabi in 1972. Additionally, the UAE opened an Emirati consulate in Mumbai in 1973. Economic interest and political reconciliation unite them to form the intimate ties. Both India and the UAE has significant potential for future expansion and development of their bilateral relationship. India has an excellent chance to improve its stand and visibility in the West Asian region because of the UAE's advantageous geographic location and strong worldwide economic standing. The UAE is particularly interested in strengthening ties with India due to its large population in the world and investor-friendly climate.[2]

Over the past few decades, the connection between the two countries have been defined by their shared political commitment, economic interests and joint commercial ventures. Currently with over 81% of all Arab investments in India, the UAE is the largest investor in the country. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and UAE attempted to address some of the earlier trade issues by providing provisions for balanced economic outcomes, comprehensive sectoral coverage and a structured mechanism to address the Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs). India's third largest trading partner is the UAE and the deal is anticipated to increase the bilateral trade by $100 billion over the next five years. In order to formulate economic, strategic and long-term trade policies for sustained economic development through increased trade contacts, India can greatly benefit from evaluating the prospective benefits of the CEPA agreement.[3]

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the bilateral economic relationship between India and UAE.
- To assess the sectoral diversification and export competitiveness in the economic sector.
- To analyse the challenges and future prospects of the relationship.

Review of Literature

Narayan Saeel and **Sarath Chandran** in their article titled **"Trade Potential of India UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)" (2025)** has examined how the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement has affected the nature and volume of the bilateral commerce between the two nations. They also presented the matter that how UAE is one of the most significant destination for trade and commerce as it is a gateway of Middle eastern and Central Asian countries for India.[4]

Dr. R. Thanga Prashath and **Vinodkumar.K.** authored the article titled **"Bilateral Trade Relation Between Inda and UAE- Historical Perspective" (2020)** have explored the historical bilateral ties between India and Gulf, including the United Arab Emirates. This paper has emphasised on the fact that India and UAE from a very historic period of time, have maintained a trade and commerce relationship. The conventional trade relationship has been flourished into a strong diversified bilateral economic relationship in modern times.[5]

Mohit Kalra in his article **"Transforming Ties: The Evolution of UAE-India Relations in the 21st Century" (2024)** has discussed about the evolution of the traditional trade connections to a multifaceted strategic partnership between India and UAE. He highlighted the impact of the bilateral trade relationship on the regional stability, economic growth and global geopolitical dynamics.[6]

Methodology

The methodology of the paper is aiming at providing a detailed systematic approach undertaken to explore the ever-evolving economic relationship between India and UAE and to analyse the multifaceted economic relationship between these two based on trade, investment, infrastructure development and strategic partnership, highlighting its significance in India's global economic strategy. A detailed literature has been reviewed and the information have been collected from the secondary sources such as books, articles published in the journals, newspaper articles, different websites such as Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Indian Ministry of trade and commerce, UAE Ministry of External Affairs, UAE Ministry of Trade and commerce.

Bilateral Economic Relationship India and UAE

The bilateral economic partnership developed between India and UAE is remarkable and significant having strategic importance which has been initiated with an annual exchange of US$ 180 million in the 1970s. Over the years, the relationship developed gradually and in the fiscal year 2012-13, the UAE became India's biggest trading partner. This demonstrates the UAE's impactful strategic position and economic policies, especially considering its small population. This bilateral trade connections have grown methodically and strategically, bolstering the nation's commercial, strategic and economic alliances. With a sizable Indian diaspora living in the UAE, this strategic partnership has also been strengthened by close cultural and interpersonal links. All things considered, the development of commercial relationship between India and UAE is the evidence of mutual understanding, common interest and strategic vision of the nations.[7]

India and UAE established their diplomatic ties in 1972 and since then, their bilateral economic ties have continued to grow stronger. With total non-oil bilateral trade valued at USD 84.84 billion in FY 2023, the UAE is currently India's largest trading partner in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. But as a whole UAE has become India's third largest trading partner after China and the USA and it is the expected to grow over USD 100 billion over the next five years. After US, UK, Singapore and Mauritius, the UAE is the fifth largest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) investor in India for the fiscal year 2023-2024. However, in 2022-2023 it was ranked as fourth largest investor. At various point of time, UAE has committed to invest more FDI in different sectors of India.[8]

CEPA

Trade ties between India and UAE grew stronger and resulted in to "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)" signed in the year 2022. The main motive of this agreement was to hike the non-oil trade between these two countries from $60 billion to $100 billion in next five years. It also facilitates a better access to the UAE exporters and service providers in 11sectors and 100 subsectors in the Indian market by reducing the tariff barrier on over 80% of items. Apart from that the enterprises, UAE gets a pricing advantage up to 10% in the UAE government procurement contracts and makes their access easier to Indian government procurement possibilities.[9] The reflections of CEPA is clearly visible in India-UAE economic relations. The bilateral trade peaked in

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the financial year 2024-2025 up to US$ 100.06 billion. With exports exceeding US$ 36.63 billion in 2024-25, the UAE is currently India's second largest export destination and third largest trading partner. India, meanwhile, is the UAE's second largest trading partner, with about US$63.4 billion in exports in FY 2024-25. CEPA enables to establish a new subcommittee on trade in service and to establish a UAE-India CEPA Council as a B2B collaboration mechanism, with a focus on MSMEs and start-ups in order to maximize the benefits of CEPA and strengthen the economic ties. These two have a well-diversified trade basket that includes important goods such as food, textiles, engineering goods, petroleum products, gems and jewellery and chemicals in recent times.[10]

IMEC

Another important development in the economic and trade relations between these two countries is the IMEC- India-Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor. It is a multimodal transportation corridor which came into picture in 2023, on the side-lines of the G20 New Delhi summit, negotiated among the members like India, UAE, USA, European Union, Saudi Arabia, Italy, France and Germany to improve trade and mutual prosperity in Europe, middle east and Indian region. As per the vision of IMEC, a northern railway corridor and an eastern marine leg will improve the connection throughout, by connecting energy grids, green hydrogen pipelines and telecommunications infrastructure. The long-term economic and security goals of UAE and India heavily depends on the digital link that IMEC seeks to establish. To close the gap in cross-boarder telecommunications, the corridor partners will work together to install high-capacity subsea and terrestrial network cables and enable 5G connectivity throughout the corridor. Talks on supporting the virtual Trade Corridor and the Master Application for Trade and Regulation Interface (MAITRI) has been initiated by officials from the UAE and India in 2025. These advancements will improve further interoperability across their digital payment ecosystems, integrate the economies and promote digital trade among them.[11]

I2U2

I2U2 stands for India, UAE, Israel and USA, which is a quadrilateral alliance formed in 2021. On 14th July, 2022, the first virtual meeting among the member countries held on combining complementary assets and capacities to meet shared socio-economic goals. Water, energy, transportation, space, health and food security are the six areas that I2U2 regards as needing collaboration and investment. In order to develop the infrastructure, create low carbon development paths for companies, enhance public health and encourage the development of vital emergent and green technologies in the member states, it plans to mobilize private sector funding and expertise. It avoids any military component to their collaboration with the platform's agenda which is centred on the development of infrastructure and the economy.[12] Joint talks are being held to develop a mega food park, joint space developments like interplanetary expedition and lunar mission between India and UAE on the lights of I2U2.[13]

Sectoral Diversification in Economic Relations

Moving beyond the traditional areas like oil and energy trade, the bilateral economic relationship between India and UAE has significantly diversified in recent years. While oil and energy cooperation still play a major role, there is now strong collaboration in emerging sectors like technology, innovation, digital economy, investments, infrastructure, green technology and defence technology. This sectoral diversification reflects a strategic partnership that is broad-based, future oriented and mutually beneficial. Different sectors that have bolstered the bilateral economic relations between these two countries are discussed below:

Energy partnership between India and UAE

Through strategic collaboration in nuclear power, vital minerals and green hydrogen, India and UAE are establishing an energy alliance having a futuristic vision. This cooperation on the energy ground is being the major dimension of the bilateral relationship. The conventional hydrocarbon trade has been replaced by civil nuclear energy, critical mineral supply chains and green hydrogen products.

A paradigm shift in bilateral relations was signalled by the historic Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was signed in September 2024 between India's Nuclear Power Cooperation of India Limited (NPCIL) and UAE's Nuclear Energy Company (ENEC). The Barakah Nuclear power plant, the first nuclear facility on the Arabian Peninsula, would be operated and maintained by Indian nuclear engineers and technicians as part of this arrangement. Under South Korean technical supervision, the $20 billion facility, which consist of four reactors with a total capacity of 5600 MW, went fully operational in 2023. The UAE has a great trust in India's nuclear technology, which has been built over decades. There are 24 domestic reactors operating with a total capacity of 8180 MW (as of July 2024) including indigenous pressurized heavy water reactors at facilities like Kudankulam is demonstrated by India's involvement in this project. The MOU lays forth a framework for NPCIL and ENEC to collaborate on safety procedures, operational best practices and the supply of nuclear goods and services.[14]

This change and transformation reflect both the nations' aspiration to address local economic priorities and establish themselves as global leaders in the energy transition.

Minerals

An important step toward resolving the severe mineral shortages in both the countries, has been taken with the signing of a MoU in September 2024 between the International Resources Holding of UAE and an Indian consortium consisting of Oil India Limited, Khanij Bidesh India (KABIL) and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited Videsh. In order to secure a comprehensive supply chain for important minerals, this partnership seeks international cooperation with an emphasis on project identification, due diligence, development strategies, risk management and offtake strategies. With a 34, 300 crore budget, India's National Critical Mineral Mission (2024) seeks to secure supply chains through domestic exploration and foreign partnerships, lowering reliance on imports of cobalt and lithium. In an effort to diversify its economy away from hydrocarbons, the UAE is using its financial resources to acquire mining assets around the world, with the help of India's geological surveys experties.[15]

Investment and Financial Stands

UAE as an investor in India's multiple sectors has signed MoUs in areas like renewable energy projects and climate change, food park development, innovative healthcare projects.[16] The two countries signed the "Bilateral Investment Treaty" in 2025. The UAE is the seventh largest foreign investor in India, with total of US $ 22.84 billion in Foreign Direct Investment from April 2000 to March 2025. With an emphasis on sectors like industries, real estate, infrastructure, energy, private equity and financial services, UAE investments are well diversified. Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) from the UAE are well established in India. The largest SWF in the UAE is 'Abu Dhabi Investment Authority' (ADIA) which has recently been opened a subsidiary office in Gujarat's GIFT- Gujrat International Financial Tec-city. Numerous Indian businesses have also established production facilities in Special Economic Zones or as joint ventures, producing consumer electronics, building materials, textiles, cement and engineering equipment. Additionally, Indian businesses including the Taj group, BITS Pilani, Zee entertainment, Ashok Leyland, Mahindra, and Dabur have made investments in the UAE's tourism, hospitality, catering, healthcare, retail, and educational sectors. Large Indian corporations have secured a considerable number of contracts in the UAE, including L&T, ESSAR, Punj Lloyds and Engineers India Ltd. Economic ties are further strengthened by the presence of several Indian public and private sector banks in the United Arab Emirates.[17]

Digital Economy

An important facilitation towards trade was taken in July 2023 when the Reserve Bank of India and the Central bank of the United Arab Emirates signed an agreement on the establishment of a local currency settlement system. Certain important documents are exchanged such as a framework to encourage the use of local currencies (INR-AED) for cross border transactions, established through a MoU between the RBI and the UAE Central bank, MoU for bilateral collaboration on connection their communications and payment systems between RBI and UAE Central bank. Furthermore, efforts are being made to link the domestic debit cards of India (RuPay) and the United Arab Emirates (JAYWAN), as well as to combine the online payment systems of Indian (UPI) and the UAE (ANI).[18]

Defence Technology

India and UAE are now working together more closely in the areas of defence technologies. The Emirates' Defence Companies Council and Society of India Defence Manufacturers have signed two MoUs on Defence Industry cooperation in 2025. In order to jointly develop unmanned systems, coproduce next generation platforms and explore for vital minerals in third world countries, the partnership unites defence enterprises from both nations.[19]

Green Technology

Among many other things, PM Modi and Mohamed Bin Zayed's "Joint Vision statement 2022" emphasized on how technology would propel the India-UAE collaboration. They identified several action areas including increased investments in cleantech and green hydrogen production. Other requirements were to cooperate on critical technologies and to support start-ups in both countries. With a concentration on innovation solutions development and the generation of renewable energy, the India-UAE collaboration on Greentech and cleantech is a step towards worldwide transition to clean energy sources. Under the framework of I2U2, India and UAE are jointly developing a hybrid renewable energy project in the Indian state of Gujrat. There is also an investment from Abu Dhabi Investment Authority in private Indian green energy firms to scale solar and wind projects. India and the UAE struck a historic agreement on green hydrogen development and investments in January 2023, just months after establishing a shared clean energy vision.[20]

Challenges in the India-UAE bilateral Economic relations

No doubt India-UAE relations has witnessed a tremendous bilateral growth in the recent course of time but it is not at all free from challenges. The bilateral relations have been hampered due to various reasons such as economic, political and social factors from both the sides. The global paradigm is also affecting the growth of the relationship between these two countries. These challenges are needed to be channelised in such a manner that it will result in boosting their cooperation.

One of the major challenges to this bilateral relation can be found in a specific area that is the exportation and importation of crude oil by UAE and India respectively. This actually holds the major share in the economies of the both the countries which gets influenced by the global oil pricing. When there is volatility in oil markets which was seen in 2020 price crash, can strain the economic relations and adversely impact on the trade volume of the countries.[21]

India as world's one of the largest markets and its growing economies are the major reason behind the attraction of the foreign investments in India. But the problem is despite of being a USD 2.5 trillion economy, the Indian businesses are lagging behind while it comes to compete with the global industry. The experiences, capabilities and infrastructural facilities they are having with them seems to be insufficient for the substantial investment which is hindering the bilateral trade and commercial deals.[22]

Sometimes Indian bureaucracy stands as a challenge in front of the bilateral trade relationship. Lack of proper planning, bureaucratic bottlenecks and insufficient information are some of the issues that are putting hurdles in front of the foreign investments, despite the hard works of government towards the ease of doing foreign business. These businesses and companies of India are also facing challenges to operate themselves in UAE because of lacking proper transparency regarding the trade laws and regulations. Along with the bureaucratic problems, there are certain legal issues that slows down the foreign investments and trading relationships in India. Having trade related laws and regulations are not sufficient, rather the procedure should be streamlined properly.[23]

Another major challenge between India and UAE relations is the trade imbalances. The list of exportation from both the sides are imbalanced. For stance, India exports a wide range of products to UAE which includes textiles, machinery and electronics whereas UAE mainly exports crude oil, gold and petroleum to India. This requires more varieties and diversification in the trading strategies to avoid the economic tensions and to ensure mutual economic profit.[24]

UAE's strong and strategic position at GCC- Gulf Cooperation Councils sometimes puts hurdles in the India's geopolitical interests and managing its relations with other regional powers like Iran. West Asian regional instability, uncertainty and war are some of the major hurdles that is hampering the bilateral as well as the regional developments with India.[25]

Despite of the government's efforts to make conducting business easier, problems including poor planning, red tapism and insufficient information are predicted to continue to be obstacles for international investments. When it comes to energy prices, the UAE being an OPEC member views the matter differently than India. India's demand for a price celling has previously sparked a number of contentious discussions among the oil ministers.[26]

Slow implementation of the investment announcements also stands as an obstacle before India-UAE bilateral economic relationship. one instance can be cited here that UAE has announced an investment funding of USD 75 billion in different sectors of India in 2015, but this has to face many problems due the late decision making in finalizing the deal. These kinds of scenarios can also create a mess in future investment programmes.[27]

There are also certain points of disagreements between India and UAE regarding the air services where the UAE desires to hike the number of flights operating between them but India is trying to stick to the limited numbers to safeguard its domestic airlines. The Indian diaspora present in UAE is a major strength of Indian economy. However, they are also facing challenges while working in UAE in forms of strict labour laws and regulations. They are also facing discriminatory behaviour towards themselves in comparison to other nationalities.[28]

Conclusion

As India accelerates its rise on the global platform, its strategic partnership with UAE will play a defining role in shaping its trajectory. The UAE is an ideal partner due to its common cultural ties, strategic location and progressive economic vision. Since there is a change in the government in 2014, India has maintained the ongoing approach towards the West Asia, specifically towards UAE. It reinforced its policy of 'Look West' to clear its visibility in the West Asia region. The growing bilateral relationship between them can stand as a role model for the world, touching the new heights of success in the third decade of the 21st century.[29] Both the countries are working together to develop platforms for innovation, sustainability and global influence in addition to promoting bilateral trade. Building this economic bridge is a roadmap for a successful, shared future in a world that is becoming more integrated and it goes beyond a diplomatic victory.

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STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND ALIGNMENTS: INFLUENCE OF INDIAN AND CHINESE ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT IN CLMV SUBREGION

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The paper examines the qualitative and quantitative aspects of Indian and Chinese economic engagement with the CLMV countries during the period 2000-2023. In the process, the article utilises secondary data from research articles, books, online databases, research reports which is complemented with primary data from interviews conducted with policy experts in India, Vietnam and Cambodia. The article undertakes comparative analysis to evaluate the distinct patterns in India-CLMV and China-CLMV economic relations. Through the application of an analytical framework, the study finds that these engagements not only foster economic growth but also wield significant influence in shaping the foreign policy decisions of the CLMV nations. By delving into the role of bilateral economic ties, the article uncovers the strategic leverage that India and China seek within this subregion.
Keywords: Hedging, Bandwagoning, India, CLMV, China

Introduction: India's economic engagement with the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) subregion has been gaining significance in recent times due to the Act East Policy (AEP), launched in 2014, which focuses on strengthening India's economic and strategic position in the Southeast Asian region. China, on the other hand, has been deepening its economic and strategic footprints in the CLMV subregion through various measures while using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, as a broad framework. As both countries actively provide developmental assistance, invest in infrastructure, and expand trade relations, the intricate linkages between economics and diplomacy unfold.

Indian and Chinese economic diplomacy in the subregion seeks to maximise their economic interests while also responding to their strategic considerations. Major strategic factors that influence Indian engagement in the subregion include security issues in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, the need to tackle insurgency in its Northeast region, and the goal of cushioning China's increasing influence in the area. On the other hand, China's presence in the CLMV subregion is largely motivated by its overarching geopolitical aims, such as securing its claims in the South China Sea, creating alternative routes to avoid the Malacca Strait and aligning interests of the subregional countries with China. In the context of such strategic concerns, India and China seek to utilise economic engagement to enhance their influence in the subregion.

The capacity of India and China in terms of infrastructure, financing, technology and investments have served to influence CLMV countries with lower economic capability. Higher capabilities not only serve as a hard power resource for the powerful state to coerce the interdependent state to achieve its objectives, but also act as a soft power resource in the international domain. Economic capabilities of big powers create significant influence among small powers that try to gain access to these capabilities such as improved technologies, financing, etc by improving relations with the bigger power. Subsequently, greater economic capabilities provide risk taking ability to big powers to use bilateral economic relations as a coercive tool for strategic gains while utilising the vulnerability of small powers.

CLMV countries are highly dependent on external sources for their trade, investments and developmental aid and as such have sought to promote economic cooperation with India and China. Moreover, domestic economic performance is a means to achieve 'performance-based legitimacy' for the ruling governments in these countries, turning international economic engagement into an important component of their foreign policy.[1] However, concerns exist regarding the risks of becoming overly reliant on one country, especially China, which has faced allegations of predatory lending and 'debt-trap' diplomacy at times.[1] Also, their asymmetrical power relations with the big powers like India and China highlights the concerns regarding strategic fallouts of international economic engagement.

As both India and China strive to deepen their influence in the complex geopolitical landscape of CLMV subregion, their economic ties present opportunities and challenges for the CLMV countries, that navigate a delicate balance between embracing international economic engagement and safeguarding their strategic autonomy. While the influx of foreign capital from India and China can spur infrastructure development and technological advancement, the inherent risks of dependency prompt these countries to cultivate a diversified partnership strategy, ensuring that they do not relinquish control over their economic futures to a singular power. This complex interplay not only heightens the stakes for regional stability but also compels smaller nations to adopt astute diplomatic strategies, leveraging their unique position in the global economy to maximise benefits while mitigating vulnerabilities.

Analytical Framework and Methodology: In an asymmetrical power relation, small powers rationally choose to hedge big powers using engagement and counter-engagement policies to secure their autonomy and reduce overarching influence of the bigger power. It is noteworthy, economic engagement is used as a hedging tool by small powers to downsize the effects of security contestations and focus on more cooperative aspects of bilateral relations. Hedging behaviour is used not only in cases related to direct security concerns but also to cushion the domination and assertiveness of a rising power. Moreover, hedging as a diversification policy, provides greater benefit and autonomy to the small states.

In contrast, small powers also bandwagon with a bigger power to maximise political and economic benefits. However, it compromises the strategic autonomy of the small powers as they unambiguously follow the lead of the big power while accepting a sub-ordinate position. While small states employ countervailing measures to diversify their engagements and retain autonomy, domestic political factors often shape these strategies. Economic performance is a key concern for political leaders in smaller countries, directly linked to political survival and regime legitimacy. Thus, the political advantages of economic engagement significantly influence the elites' perspectives and strategic decisions of smaller powers. We assert that the form and nature of economic engagement with bigger powers significantly impact the strategic behaviour of smaller CLMV countries. In areas where big powers compete for influence, smaller powers may exploit their position to secure advantages. However, internal factors, such as domestic political dynamics and economic conditions, interact with external pressures. Smaller states must navigate these complexities to promote their strategic autonomy while maximising their political and economic interests.

Table 1. Parameters of Hedging and Bandwagoning

	Bandwagoning	Hedging
Aim	Profit maximisation, security	Reduced risk but with gains
Effect	Reduced autonomy or sub-ordinated position	Enhanced autonomy, insurance against coercion, multi-alignment policies

Source: Authors

Given that small countries align their strategies based on perceived threats or opportunities arising from larger powers' policies, this article undertakes a comparative analysis of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of Indian and Chinese economic engagement in the CLMV subregion. The quantitative dimension incorporates trade, investments, and developmental cooperation, while the qualitative aspect examines the political and economic impacts on host countries. The article utilises a range of primary and secondary sources—including personal communication with policy experts during field visit in India, Vietnam and Cambodia; government reports; policy documents; online databases; academic publications; and media coverage. It further evaluates how the economic engagement strategies of India and China influence the strategic alignments of CLMV countries.

Strategic and Economic Intersections in CLMV Subregion: The CLMV subregion has gained strategic significance owing to its geographic location, economic potential and growing regional influence. Situated at the intersection of South, East and Southeast Asia, the CLMV subregion occupies a vital geopolitical

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space with implications for the broader Indo-Pacific region. From an economic point of view, the CLMV subregion holds importance due to several key factors. Firstly, the CLMV countries possess valuable resources, pool of skilled workers, and growth of diverse range of industries, making them attractive economic partners for countries seeking to diversify their supply chains and tap into new markets.[2] Their integration into the regional and thereby global value chain, facilitated by various multilateral and bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) and investment arrangements, provides opportunities for investment, trade, and production linkages that can contribute to the economic growth of the partner countries. Secondly, the CLMV subregion has witnessed sustained economic growth over the past two decades, with Vietnam and Cambodia achieving significant economic gains. This growth has been facilitated by factors such as market liberalization, infrastructure development, and the integration of these economies into regional and global trade networks.

Table 2 GDP of CLMV Countries in 2023

	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
GDP in current USD (in billion)	31.77	15.84	64.82	429.72

Source: World Bank Data.[3]

Table 3: International Trade and Investment Agreements signed by CLMV Countries

Trade	India-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) FTA, China-ASEAN FTA, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area, ASEAN – Japan Free Trade Area, ASEAN-Republic of Korea Free Trade Area
Investments	ASEAN-China Investment Agreement (2009), ASEAN-India Investment Agreement (2014)

Source: Authors

In the backdrop of increasing geopolitical concerns over China's international economic engagements, US-China trade war and the emergence of Indo-Pacific as an integrated region, international economic engagement in the subregion has assumed strategic significance. The evolving relationship between the CLMV subregion and major regional powers like China and India underscores a broader narrative of interdependence—where economic engagements not only fuel national development but also redefine their strategic alignments.

China's Economic Engagement with CLMV

Trade: CLMV countries are low-income countries with trade playing a very significant role in their GDP. Furthermore, all the four countries i.e., Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam are highly dependent on China for their trade while facing a negative trade balance with China (see Table 4 and 5).

Table 4: China's Trade with CLMV in 2023 (Value in USD Billion)

	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Export	12.7	3.3	11.4	137.6
Import	2	3.7	9.5	92

Source: UN Comtrade Database.[4]

Table 5: China's Partner Share in CLMV countries' Trade in 2023 (in Percentage Terms)

	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Export Share	6.83	28.79	31.78	15.66
Import Share	37.41	29	34.64	29.82

Source: World Bank Data.[5]

Chinese Debt: Table 6 provides the Debt to GDP Ratio indicating the financial position of CLMV countries. Besides the reported debt obligations to China, "nearly 50 percent of China's overseas lending goes unreported".[6] Compounding the problem of irregular credit reporting is the issue of 'hidden debt' that is usually given to the public sector entities rather than sovereign governments. For such reasons, it remains unreported to multilateral and credit rating agencies. However, unlike private sector enterprises, public sector entities and its borrowings are a responsibility of the government that could promote its debt distress. Such factors hamper debt sustainability analysis and create "obstacle to crisis resolution".[7]

Table 6: Debt to GDP Ratio of CLMV Countries for the year 2022

Country	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Debt to GDP Ratio (in per cent)	36.8	68.01	62.5	37.1

Source: World Population Review (2024).[8]

As shown in Table 7, while Laos which has sovereign debt exposure of 30 percent of its GDP to China, it has cumulative debt exposure of more than 60 percent. Such huge debt exposure to a single country creates multiple risk factors including payment defaults resulting in various unfavourable demands from the creditor. Another associated aspect of Chinese debt is the 'circular lending strategy' in which it directly transfers the loan amount to the designated Chinese company involved in the project.[9]

Table 7: Debt Exposure to China as a Percentage of country's GDP (2000-2017)

Country	Sovereign Debt Exposure	Hidden Debt Exposure	Cumulative Exposure
Cambodia	20%	Less than 1%	21%
Laos	30%	35.4%	65.4%
Myanmar	Less than 10%	Less than 10%	Less than 20%
Vietnam	Less than 10%	Less than 10%	Less than 20%

Source: Banking on the Belt and Road.[10]

BRI Projects: China's BRI has financed large number of projects in CLMV (see Table 8). These range from highways and railways to dams and special economic zones. However, many projects have encountered problems leading to slow execution and socio-economic problems (see Table 9).

Table 8: BRI Projects in CLMV (2013–2021)

Country	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Number of Projects	82	20	33	12
Value in USD Billions	6.77	2.48	2.02	3.81

Source: AIDDATA.[11]

Table 9: Number of Projects Encountering Problems (2013-2021)

Countries	Scandals, Controversies, Alleged Violations	Community and Ecosystem Harm	Under Performance
Cambodia	2(860 million USD)	1 (759 million USD)	-
Laos	-	-	-
Myanmar	-	1	-
Vietnam	5(2747 million USD)	-	3 (664 million USD)

Source: AIDDATA.[12]

Country-specific examples help explain China's approach:

- **Cambodia:** It is the largest BRI recipient (US$6.8B in 2013–21). Most projects are financed through BOT (Build–Operate–Transfer) model, meaning China bears most debt risk. Besides, Cambodia has tried to gain funds and investments from other major players in the region, diversifying its partnership.[13] However, Chinese investments in Cambodia generally have limited partnerships with local firms and provide little technology transfer.[14] Socially, critics raise issues like environmental impacts, rising Chinese migration, corruption, and monopolization of commerce by Chinese companies.
- **Laos:** China's flagship projects include the Vientiane–Kunming high-speed railway and major hydropower dams. The railway is intended to make

landlocked Laos "land-linked," connecting it to Vietnam and Thailand. Notably, this rail project alone is worth about one-third of Laos's GDP, with 70% Chinese funding.[15] These projects promise economic benefits and bolster the ruling party's legitimacy, but they also saddle Laos with heavy debts and strategic dependency.

- **Myanmar:** Chinese investment includes hydropower dams (e.g. Yeywa), highways, new city developments and especially the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). CMEC, anchored by Kyaukphyu port, would link China's Yunnan province to the Bay of Bengal, giving China direct Indian Ocean access. However, Myanmar's stance regarding ownership - it increased its stake in the Kyaukphyu port from 15% to 30% - and cost cuts under civilian rule underscore its hesitations towards BRI.[16] While several projects are delayed or contested amid debt-trap fear, Myanmar also resents China's backing of local insurgent groups.
- **Vietnam:** Vietnam has been cautious with BRI. While formally a BRI participant, Hanoi avoids using the label 'BRI' for China backed projects. Approved projects have also faced greater scrutiny. For instance, Vietnam cancelled a North–South expressway contract in 2019 amid allegations of corrupt bidding and security concerns.[17] Vietnam's ongoing maritime disputes with China further encourage it to hedge Chinese influence by diversifying partners.

China's Development Cooperation: China pursues development cooperation with CLMV under the South–South framework, adopted by developing countries to promote mutual development in contrast to developmental aid and assistance mechanism adopted by the rich developed nations. China offers grants, concessional loans, technical training, and capacity-building programs, often linked to BRI infrastructure projects. In CLMV, aid is heavily skewed toward infrastructure while sectors like health and education get little attention. China touts the mutually beneficial nature of its developmental cooperation that comes without policy conditionalities, but the opacity has become a major roadblock in furthering goodwill, an important objective of development cooperation. China's 2021 white paper on Development Cooperation promises more rigorous project planning, technology transfer, and consultation, but there has been less tangible progress on the ground.

India's Economic Engagement in CLMV: India's CLMV policy is driven by its Act East Policy- strengthening economic and development partnerships while cushioning Chinese influence in the subregion.

Trade: Trade between India and CLMV has grown since the 2010 ASEAN–India FTA, but India remains a minor partner. Several factors limit India–CLMV trade: lack of complementary industries, competition from China and other blocs, and India's absence from recent mega-FTAs like Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Table 10: India's Trade with CLMV in 2023 (in billion USD)

Country	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Total Trade	0.53	0.15	1.80	15.29

Source: UN Comtrade Database[18]

Table 11: India's Partner Share in CLMV countries' trade (In percent)

Country	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Export Share	0.44	1.56	3.51	2.52
Import Share	0.95	0.6	3.77	1.78

Source: World Bank Data.[19]

Investments: Indian FDI in CLMV is very limited and concentrated. CLMV countries together receive under 1% of India's global outward FDI. Within CLMV, Vietnam and Myanmar attract most Indian investment, while Cambodia and Laos together get nearly 5% of India's CLMV FDI. Indian investors focus on a few sectors: mining and plantations in Laos; infrastructure and energy in Myanmar; and pharmaceuticals, IT, and energy in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Table 12: Indian Overseas Direct Investment (ODI) in CLMV countries (in USD million)

Country	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam	CLMV Total
2017-18	2.3	0.7	54.7	73.9	131.5

Source: Chakrabarty (2019)[20]

Investors cite Vietnam's advantages such as low tax rates, skilled labour, economic stability along with opportunities from companies diversifying out of China due to trade tensions with the US. To encourage such investments, India launched a $1 billion Project Development Fund (PDF) in 2016. However, progress has been slow as only a few PDF projects were identified and none greatly expanded India's industrial footprint in CLMV. Domestic financing (via EXIM Bank) for overseas projects is not as generous or fast as Chinese credit. Indian EPC contractors, though capable, rarely win major CLMV contracts due to lack of competitive credit facilities and bureaucratic constraints (Indronil Sengupta, personal communication, June 12, 2024). India has also invested via government-led infrastructure projects. The India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway – partly funded and built by India – aims to connect India's Northeast to Southeast Asia. Work has been slow, hindered by difficult terrain, insurgent-controlled areas, and Myanmar's civil conflict. Another example is the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) in Myanmar: a US$484M Indian LOC funded a port at Sittwe, an inland waterway, and a highway to India's border. The port and waterways are completed, but the highway link remains delayed by security issues. Once finished, Kaladan would give India access to its Northeast via Myanmar, bypassing the narrow Siliguri Corridor and potentially boosting India's border economy. Indian state energy enterprises are also active in the region. For decades, ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) and GAIL have held stakes in Myanmar's oil and gas fields. In Vietnam, OVL obtained exploration licenses (block 06.1 and block 128 in the South China Sea). Although exploring block 128 has involved technical losses and Chinese objections, India's continued presence there is seen by Vietnam as a way to balance China economically and strategically.

Development Cooperation: India's developmental aid to CLMV focuses on capacity-building and demand-driven projects. Major tools include concessional Line of Credit (LOCs) for infrastructure, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, educational scholarships, and Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) under the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation. ITEC has trained many CLMV officials, which builds goodwill; however, the program is underutilised – e.g. of 200 ITEC slots offered to Cambodia in 2019–20, only 154 were filled (Table 13). Scholarships to study in India also face competition from China and Western programs. India's soft-power initiatives are well-regarded in principle, but limited implementation dilutes their impact.

Table 13: ITEC Slots Allocation and Actual Utilisation

Country	Number of ITEC Slots Allotted in 2019-2020	ITEC Participants in 2020-21
Cambodia	200	154
Laos	170	27
Myanmar	480	137
Vietnam	260	60

Source: Parliament of India.[21]

India has sharply increased LOC funding to CLMV. Approved LOC commitments rose from about US$3.27B in 2014 to $14.7B in 2020. These credits, while country-driven, often require sourcing most supplies from India (approximately 75% by contract). Reflecting its 'neighbourhood first' policy, nearly half of India's CLMV LOCs go to Myanmar, with Vietnam next (especially after including a $500M defence loan). Table 15 shows the size of active LOCs (as of May 2022). India's LOC-funded projects (e.g. electricity, roads, irrigation) aim to build infrastructure and goodwill, but also tie recipients to Indian technology and standards.

Table 14: Operational Indian LOCs to CLMV countries (in US $)

	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Operative LOCs (May 2022)	102.12 million	153.83 million	476 million USD	691.5 million (including 500 million $ defence related LOC)

Source: EXIM Bank database.[22]

In addition, India sponsors Quick Impact Projects (small-scale infrastructure and social projects) in CLMV at the community level. These projects provide tangible benefits and foster goodwill, but their overall strategic effect is modest. This comparative overview shows clear contrasts. China's footprint in CLMV is deep and infrastructure-heavy, backed by massive state financing. India's presence is much smaller, focused on connectivity, selective investment, and capacity-building. Chinese investment delivers rapid growth at a cost of debt and dependence, while Indian engagement offers transparent aid and technological assistance, albeit slower and smaller in scale. The following sections assess how these differing patterns of economic engagement shape CLMV countries' strategic alignments.

Top of Form Bottom of Form

Linking Economic Engagement to Strategic Choices: The preceding analysis highlights the distinct patterns of Chinese and Indian economic engagement with the CLMV countries. China's approach has been expansive, infrastructure-driven, and state-led, producing rapid inflows of capital but also exposing recipient states to risks of overdependence and debt vulnerabilities. Its projects, often under the BRI framework, reflect a top-down model that combines economic incentives with implicit strategic leverage. India's engagement, in contrast, remains more modest in scale but carries different qualities: a focus on capacity-building, demand-driven Lines of Credit, community-level projects, and technical cooperation. While Indian initiatives often suffer from slower implementation and limited visibility, they tend to be associated with transparency, local participation, and normative credibility. These contrasting models underscore that economic ties are not merely transactional but are deeply interwoven with questions of autonomy, legitimacy, and long-term strategic orientation. For the CLMV states, the choice is not between rejecting or embracing one partner but rather calibrating the extent to which each engagement can be used to advance domestic priorities while mitigating vulnerabilities. This interplay between economic dependence and strategic autonomy forms the crux of their policy behaviour. The next section examines how these economic engagements translate into strategic alignments. It explores the ways in which CLMV countries hedge, bandwagon, or diversify their relations with China and India, and how economic choices become instruments of broader foreign policy strategy.

Strategic Influence of Economic Engagement: A Comparison: Although China is a source of much needed investments and of cheaper goods in the CLMV subregion, it has created problems on multiple fronts. The large-scale BRI investments in the CLMV subregion have led to asymmetrical economic gains with China receiving major benefits.[23] Such factors have not only widened the power gap between China and CLMV but also consolidated China's sphere of influence in the subregion. The proximity between Chinese state and its commercial entities provides it the leverage to gain strategic benefits out of economic engagements.[24] Furthermore, the cyclical debt patterns seen in Chinese lending due to non-viable investments have deteriorated the domestic economic and political situation in host countries, further weakening their bargaining position. Highlighting concerns over Chinese debt diplomacy, Jabin Jacob (personal communication, February 1, 2024) argues: While China's economic engagements come with no strings attached, its conditions come later. Debt diplomacy is not just a question of numbers, it is more than that. It is also a sort of degradation of political accountability that aggravates the debt trap.

For the CLMV countries, increased Indian economic engagement could serve to overcome the developmental deficit and promote a sustainable economic growth. This emanates from India's impetus on transparency, technology transfer, capacity building and technical assistance in its economic engagement. However, slow progress of Indian developmental projects has negatively affected India's image. Besides, India's lack of thrust towards popularising its developmental work and other initiatives have hampered its ability to utilise it as a leverage in foreign policy (Le Thu Mach, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

Table 15: Nature of Indian and Chinese Economic Engagement

	Nature	Processes
India	Mutual benefit	Bottom to top, Normativism, Transparency
China	Asymmetrical	Top to bottom, Pragmatism, Opacity

Source: Authors

India, despite a tilt toward pragmatism, is still seen as upholding normative values, unlike China. For example, India engages Myanmar's junta but avoids ethnic armed groups; in Cambodia, it recognized the Heng Samrin regime in 1979 after the Khmer Rouge. China, by contrast, has aided both Myanmar's military and local rebels, and in Cambodia supported both the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s and Hun Sen in the 1980s–90s, revealing a pragmatic, interest-driven stance. Cambodia's foreign policy indicates bandwagoning rather than hedging Chinese influence, showcasing deviation from the strategic approach adopted by many small players in the region. Cambodia's bandwagoning with China has to do with not only China's massive economic investment but also its role in supporting Cambodian People's Party (CPP) to maintain its predominance in domestic politics. The level of Cambodia's bandwagoning with China varies from limited to comprehensive. Cambodia does not have any action plan to keep the Chinese influence at bay, rather, it embraces such influence.[25] Economic engagement with China has benefitted Cambodian political elites who have been able to build personal wealth and thereby sustain the patron-client network in Cambodian politics. India wields considerable influence in Cambodia, highlighted by increasing economic ties, strong cultural connections and its perception of a reliable partner. For instance, India's diplomatic recognition of the Heng Samrin regime still holds a considerable influence in India-Cambodia relations (Him Raksmey, personal communication, June 18, 2024). Hun Manet's visit to India in his capacity as a Commander of the Royal Cambodian Army in 2023, now the Prime Minister, serves as a precursor to shifts in India-Cambodia relations towards deeper engagement in future.[26] However, the intricate web of political dynamics complicates Cambodia's ability to balance its relationships with both China and India, often swaying towards the former due to immediate tangible benefits.

Laos has shared close political and economic ties with Vietnam but in the recent decades its deepened economic engagement with China has led to shifts in Laos' international alignments.[27] As a landlocked country, located between China and Vietnam, Laos' economic goals of growth and development are shaped through its relations with the bigger neighbours. Laos depends on neighbouring countries for finances and access to ports for international trade. In this scenario, China's huge economic prowess serves to influence Laotian foreign policy. However, Laos' 'equal handed' foreign policy behaviour provides it leverage in cushioning Chinese influence.[28] On the other hand, strategic significance of India's economic engagement for Laos is subdued due to weak economic linkages as well as lack of connectivity and infrastructure development between the two countries. However, plan to extend IMT highway to Laos besides enhancement of India's developmental cooperation through bilateral cooperation and multilateral efforts under Mekong Ganga Cooperation could serve to enhance India's influence. In case of Myanmar, the policy options point towards hedging Chinese influence, depicted by the former's growing insistence to reduce economic dependence on China and critical attitude towards China's engagement with local ethnic rebel groups. Myanmar's strategic policy is inclined towards balancing the influence of both India and China through an equidistant foreign policy. KMMTTP and KPSEZ built by India and China respectively in proximity, evidence Myanmar's counterweight strategy to balance the influence of both its neighbours. Such policy option has benefitted Myanmar's military regime that enjoys continued engagement with both India and China in economic as well as security domains despite heavy international sanctions slapped by Western countries and institutions.[29]

Table 16: Strategic Approach of CLMV countries towards India and China

Countries	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
China	Bandwagoning (Limited to Comprehensive)	Less Hedging and more accommodation	Hedging	Hedging (Engagement and Counter engagement)
India	Less Influence	Less Influence	Hedging	Hedging (Engagement and Counter engagement)

Source: Authors

In case of Vietnam, hedging as a policy tool connotes economic engagement with China along with continued partner diversification in economic and strategic space that promotes its strategic autonomy and reduces vulnerability. This is reflected by its grant of block 128 to India's ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) in the contested water of South China Sea along with increased defence engagement with India and other countries including the US. Furthermore, Vietnam's emergence as a manufacturing hub with high GDP growth rate has enhanced its bargaining power and reduced vulnerability in strategic domain.

Conclusion: Economic aspects play a crucial role in shaping the strategic dynamics in the CLMV subregion. While China-CLMV economic engagement provides economic benefits to the host countries, it has also led to negative outcomes for CLMV countries resulting into lower economic gains, increased dependency on China and lower bargaining power. Decreased strategic autonomy is visible in cases of muted or lower response than anticipated and accommodation of Chinese interests. India plays a vital role as a strategic counterweight in the subregion while falling short as an economic counterweight to China. Nonetheless, India's emergence as a more capable economic powerhouse with continued high growth rate in terms of GDP, thrust towards greater economic and developmental cooperation with CLMV countries and its rising influence in the wider Indo-Pacific region act as significant influence on CLMV countries. India's emphasis on transparency and accountability serves as a key qualitative factor shaping its engagement with CLMV countries. Moreover, the character of India's economic and political power does not generate the same strategic anxieties as the tightly interwoven political–economic nexus of the Chinese state. Despite the strategic benefits that both India and China seek to draw through economic means, a lot depends upon the calculations and interests of domestic political elites. In the absence of a typical balance of power competition in the region, hedging as a strategic choice will continue to favour the interests of small players, with greater significance accorded to economic engagement as a tool of statecraft. While India's thrust on deepened engagement in the subregion has increased, it will need to streamline its strategic and economic policies to position itself as a counterweight to China. However, it would be important for India to shape its policies that not only enhance its strategic interests but also build the domestic capacity of the CLMV countries in various areas including economic, medical, technical and technological fields.

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GEOPOLITICS, ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY, AND THE FUTURE OF ASIAN ORDER: THE SINO-INDIAN PUZZLE

Beenapani Rout

The evolving relationship between China and India represents one of the most complex geopolitical puzzles in contemporary Asian politics. This research examines the intersection of traditional geopolitical considerations and ontological security concerns in shaping Sino-Indian relations and their implications for the broader Asian order. Through an analysis of recent diplomatic developments, including high-level visits and border tensions, this study explores how both nations navigate their quest for ontological security while managing strategic competition. The research reveals that while traditional realpolitik continues to influence bilateral relations, ontological security considerations increasingly shape policy decisions and regional alignment patterns. The findings suggest that the future of Asian order will be significantly determined by how China and India reconcile their ontological security needs with geopolitical realities.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Ontological Security, Asian Order, China-India Relations, Regional Security

1. Introduction: The relationship between China and India, the world's two most populous nations and emerging economic powerhouses, stands at the center of contemporary discussions about the future of Asian order. As both countries rise to prominence on the global stage, their interactions are increasingly characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation and competition that extends far beyond traditional geopolitical calculations. The concept of ontological security, which refers to a state's need to maintain a consistent and stable sense of identity and self-certainty in its relations with others, has become increasingly relevant in understanding the nuances of Sino-Indian relations. Recent developments in China-India relations, including border tensions, trade disputes, and diplomatic initiatives, highlight the multifaceted nature of their relationship. The traditional geopolitical lens, while still relevant, fails to capture the full complexity of how these two Asian giants navigate their bilateral relationship while simultaneously seeking to establish their respective roles in the evolving regional order. The contemporary Asian security landscape is witnessing unprecedented transformation as both China and India assert their claims to great power status. This transformation is not merely about material capabilities or economic growth, but fundamentally concerns how these nations conceive of themselves and their rightful place in the international hierarchy. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in the first combat deaths along the Sino-Indian border in 45 years, exemplified how deeply rooted identity concerns can escalate even routine border management issues into major international incidents.[1] The subsequent diplomatic efforts to restore stability, including multiple rounds of military commander-level talks and the recent agreement on border patrolling arrangements in October 2024, demonstrate both nations' recognition that their relationship requires careful management of both material and ideational dimensions. The significance of the Sino-Indian relationship extends far beyond bilateral concerns to encompass the broader question of Asian order. As the region's two largest economies and most populous nations, their relationship pattern influences everything from trade flows and investment patterns to alliance structures and multilateral institution effectiveness. The Asian century, long anticipated by scholars and policymakers, increasingly appears contingent upon how successfully China and India can navigate their complex relationship.[2] Their interactions within frameworks such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank serve as testing grounds for whether rising powers can cooperate effectively in reshaping global governance structures. The puzzle of Sino-Indian relations becomes even more complex when considering the role of third parties and external powers. The United States' pivot to Asia and India's participation in the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the US, Japan, and Australia represent significant developments that cannot be understood purely through bilateral analysis. Similarly, China's deepening partnership with Pakistan and its Belt and Road Initiative's implications for South Asian connectivity create additional layers of complexity. These multilateral dimensions suggest that the Sino-Indian relationship is embedded within broader patterns of great power competition and cooperation that characterize the contemporary international system.

Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic engagements with Chinese leadership, including recent meetings on the sidelines of BRICS and other multilateral summits, reflect both countries' recognition that their relationship requires continuous high-level attention. These diplomatic encounters, while often producing modest tangible outcomes, serve important functions in managing mutual perceptions and preventing misunderstandings that could escalate into larger conflicts. The symbolism of these meetings, the language used in joint statements, and the atmospherics surrounding such encounters all contribute to the ontological security of both nations by affirming their status as responsible major powers capable of managing complex relationships. This research paper examines how geopolitical considerations intersect with ontological security concerns to shape the Sino-Indian relationship and its implications for the broader Asian order. By analyzing recent diplomatic developments and policy decisions, this study seeks to provide insights into how both nations balance their quest for ontological security with strategic competition and cooperation. The analysis reveals that while material factors such as military capabilities, economic resources, and territorial control remain important, the ideational dimensions of identity, status, and recognition play increasingly critical roles in determining the trajectory of bilateral relations and their broader regional implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Geopolitics and Asian Order: The study of geopolitics in Asia has traditionally focused on power distribution, territorial disputes, and strategic competition among major powers. Classical geopolitical theory, as developed by scholars like Mackinder and Spykman, emphasized the importance of geographic factors in shaping international relations.[3] In the Asian context, this has translated into analyses of sea lanes, border disputes, and spheres of influence. Traditional security studies in Asia have been dominated by realist assumptions about power competition and balance of power dynamics, particularly in the context of US hegemony and the rise of China.[4] Contemporary scholarship on Asian geopolitics has evolved to incorporate economic interdependence, multilateral institutions, and non-traditional security concerns. The rise of China and India has prompted renewed interest in balance of power dynamics and the potential for power transition conflicts in the region. The traditional Westphalian state system is being challenged by new forms of regional order that blend sovereignty with multilateral governance structures.[5] This evolution is particularly evident in Asia, where economic integration proceeds alongside persistent territorial disputes and strategic competition. The concept of the "Asian Century" has gained prominence in academic and policy circles, reflecting expectations that Asia will become the dominant region in global affairs.[6] However, scholarship has increasingly recognized that realizing this potential depends critically on how major Asian powers, particularly China and India, manage their relationships. The regional order that emerges will be shaped not only by material power distributions but also by normative frameworks and institutional arrangements that these powers help create and sustain. Recent developments in Asian geopolitics have highlighted the importance of maritime security, particularly in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean regions. The constructivist approach to international relations provides valuable insights into how states' identities and interests are shaped through social interaction, which is particularly relevant for understanding evolving patterns of cooperation and competition in Asia.[7] The region's complex web of bilateral and multilateral relationships creates multiple overlapping security complexes that defy simple balance of power explanations.

2.2 Ontological Security in International Relations: The concept of ontological security, originally developed in sociology and psychology, has gained traction in international relations scholarship as a means to understand state behavior beyond material security concerns.[8] Ontological security refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments. This concept has been pioneered in international relations, arguing that states seek ontological security through the maintenance of consistent identities and predictable relationships with other states.[9] When applied to states, ontological security involves the maintenance of a consistent and stable sense of national identity and self-certainty in international relations.[10] This includes the preservation of historical narratives, cultural values, and role conceptions that define a state's place in the international system. Ontological security concerns can sometimes conflict with physical security imperatives, creating complex policy dilemmas for decision-makers.[11]

The literature on ontological security has identified several key mechanisms

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through which states maintain their sense of self. These include the construction and maintenance of national narratives, the establishment of predictable relationships with significant others, and the pursuit of recognition from other states and international institutions.[12] Security discourse itself becomes a means of constructing and maintaining state identity, as governments define threats and responses in ways that reinforce particular conceptions of national self.[13]

Recent scholarship has explored how ontological security concerns influence foreign policy behavior, particularly in cases where states face challenges to their established identities or role conceptions. The need for ontological security can lead states to pursue policies that may not maximize their material security but serve to maintain their sense of self-continuity.[14] This insight is particularly relevant for understanding the behavior of rising powers like China and India, whose rapid growth and changing international status create ongoing challenges to established identity narratives.

2.3 Sino-Indian Relations in Academic Literature

Academic literature on China-India relations has traditionally focused on border disputes, strategic competition, and economic cooperation. The unresolved boundary question, stemming from colonial-era demarcations and differing interpretations of historical agreements, has received extensive scholarly attention.[15] Early scholarship emphasized the military and strategic dimensions of the relationship, particularly following the 1962 border war and subsequent military buildups along the Line of Actual Control.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the role of identity, status, and prestige in shaping bilateral relations, though the specific application of ontological security theory to Sino-Indian relations remains underexplored. Both countries' foreign policies are influenced by their self-perceptions as ancient civilizations and natural leaders in Asian affairs.[16] This civilizational discourse creates both opportunities for mutual understanding and potential sources of competition over regional leadership roles.

Studies have examined various aspects of the relationship, including military modernization, nuclear dynamics, and competition in third countries, particularly in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. However, much of this literature has focused on material factors while neglecting the ideational dimensions that shape how both countries perceive their relationship and define their interests.[17] The role of domestic politics, national identity, and historical memory in shaping foreign policy choices has received increasing attention in recent years.

The economic dimension of Sino-Indian relations has generated significant scholarly interest, particularly as China has become India's largest trading partner despite ongoing political tensions. The observation that "anarchy is what states make of it" is particularly relevant for understanding how economic interdependence coexists with strategic competition in the bilateral relationship.[18] Some scholars argue that economic ties create incentives for cooperation and conflict avoidance, while others contend that economic competition, particularly in technology and manufacturing, may exacerbate strategic tensions.

The multilateral dimension of Sino-Indian relations has received growing attention as both countries participate in various regional and global institutions. Their interactions within BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and other forums provide insights into how they manage competitive dynamics while pursuing common interests in reforming global governance structures.[19] Multilateral institutions can serve as venues for managing ontological security concerns by providing recognition and validation of states' identities and roles.[20]

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that Sino-Indian relations cannot be understood in isolation from broader regional and global dynamics. The involvement of other major powers, particularly the United States, creates complex triangular relationships that influence bilateral dynamics. The rise of both China and India occurs within a context of global power transition that creates uncertainties and anxieties requiring careful management through both material and ideational strategies.[21]

There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the intersection of geopolitical competition and ontological security concerns in Sino-Indian relations. While scholars have examined various aspects of the relationship, few have systematically analyzed how identity concerns shape strategic choices and how both countries navigate the tension between material security and ontological security imperatives. This research seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis that integrates both perspectives to better understand the dynamics of this critical bilateral relationship and its implications for regional order.

3. Theoretical Framework: This study employs a theoretical framework that integrates traditional geopolitical analysis with ontological security theory. The framework recognizes that state behavior is influenced by both material security concerns and identity-based security needs.

Table 1: Theoretical Framework Components

Component	Geopolitical Perspective	Ontological Security Perspective
Primary Concern	Material power and security	Identity and self-certainty
Key Variables	Military capabilities, economic resources, territory	Historical narratives, role conceptions, status
Analytical Focus	Competition and balance of power	Identity maintenance and validation
Policy Implications	Alliance formation, deterrence, containment	Diplomatic recognition, symbolic politics

The framework suggests that both China and India seek to maximize their material security while simultaneously maintaining their ontological security. This dual pursuit can lead to both convergent and divergent interests, creating opportunities for cooperation as well as sources of conflict.

4. Methodology: This research employs a qualitative approach based on analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official government statements, diplomatic documents, policy papers, and academic literature. The study examines recent developments in Sino-Indian relations, with particular attention to high-level diplomatic visits, border negotiations, and multilateral engagements. The analysis focuses on the period from 2020 to 2024, which has witnessed significant developments in China-India relations, including the Galwan Valley clash, subsequent diplomatic efforts to manage tensions, and recent initiatives to restore normalcy in bilateral relations.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Geopolitical Dimensions of Sino-Indian Relations: The geopolitical relationship between China and India is characterized by both structural competition and practical cooperation. Structurally, the rise of both powers creates natural competition for influence in Asia and beyond. This competition manifests in several key areas: Border Disputes and Territorial Claims The unresolved border dispute between China and India remains a central geopolitical issue. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) stretches approximately 3,488 kilometers and involves disputed territories in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. Recent incidents, including the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, have highlighted the potential for escalation and the need for effective crisis management mechanisms.

Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean: China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and establishment of the Djibouti naval base has raised concerns in India about potential encirclement. India's response has included strengthening partnerships with littoral states and developing its own connectivity initiatives.

Competition in Third Countries: Both China and India compete for influence in neighboring countries, particularly in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. This competition involves economic investments, infrastructure development, and diplomatic engagement.

5.2 Ontological Security Considerations: Beyond traditional geopolitical calculations, both China and India are driven by ontological security concerns that shape their bilateral relationship:

China's Ontological Security Concerns: For China, ontological security involves maintaining its self-conception as a rising great power reclaiming its historical position in Asia and the world. This includes several key elements: Historical Restoration: China's rise is framed as the restoration of its natural position as a major power, reversing the "century of humiliation."

Territorial Integrity: Maintaining control over disputed territories is linked to national identity and the legitimacy of the Communist Party. Regional Leadership: China seeks recognition as the leading power in Asia, which requires managing

its relationship with other major powers like India. India's Ontological Security Concerns India's ontological security concerns center around its identity as an independent, sovereign power with a unique civilizational heritage: Strategic Autonomy: India's commitment to strategic autonomy reflects its desire to maintain independence in foreign policy decision-making. Great Power Status: India seeks recognition as a major power, including permanent membership in the UN Security Council and other international institutions. Cultural Identity: India's foreign policy is influenced by its self-conception as an ancient civilization with unique values and perspectives.

5.3 Recent Developments and Their Implications:

1. Recent developments in Sino-Indian relations provide insights into how both countries navigate the intersection of geopolitical and ontological security concerns:
2. Post-Galwan Diplomatic Efforts
3. Following the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash, both countries have engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts to manage tensions and prevent further escalation. These efforts have included:
4. Military and Diplomatic Dialogue: Regular meetings between military commanders and diplomatic officials to discuss border management.
5. Confidence-Building Measures: Implementation of protocols to prevent incidents and manage tensions along the LAC.
6. Economic Engagement: Despite political tensions, both countries have maintained significant economic ties, though with some restrictions.
7. High-Level Diplomatic Engagement Recent high-level diplomatic engagements, including meetings between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of multilateral summits, demonstrate both countries' recognition of the importance of managing their relationship:

Table 2: Recent High-Level Sino-Indian Diplomatic Engagements (2022-2024)

Date	Event	Location	Key Outcomes
November 2022	Modi-Xi Meeting	G20 Summit, Bali	Agreement to maintain peace at border
September 2023	Modi-Xi Meeting	BRICS Summit, South Africa	Discussion on border management
October 2024	Border Patrol Agreement	Various	New protocols for border management

5.4 Implications for Asian Order: The Sino-Indian relationship has significant implications for the broader Asian order:

Multilateral Engagement: Both countries participate in various multilateral forums, including BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Their relationship within these frameworks influences the effectiveness of these institutions and their role in shaping regional governance.

Alliance Patterns: The Sino-Indian relationship affects alliance patterns in Asia. India's participation in the Quad (with the United States, Japan, and Australia) is partly a response to China's growing influence, while China's partnerships with Pakistan and other South Asian countries are influenced by its competition with India.

Economic Integration: Despite political tensions, economic interdependence between China and India continues to grow. China remains one of India's largest trading partners, and both countries benefit from economic cooperation in areas such as technology and infrastructure.

5.5 Challenges and Opportunities: The intersection of geopolitical competition and ontological security concerns creates both challenges and opportunities for Sino-Indian relations:

Challenges: Identity Conflicts: Competing narratives about regional leadership and historical legitimacy create persistent tensions.

Structural Competition: The rise of both powers creates inevitable competition for resources, markets, and influence.

Alliance Dynamics: Different alliance preferences and strategic partnerships create additional sources of tension.

Opportunities: Economic Cooperation: Both countries benefit from economic cooperation and can find mutually beneficial areas for collaboration. Multilateral Governance: Shared interests in reforming global governance structures provide opportunities for cooperation. Climate and Sustainability: Common challenges such as climate change and sustainable development create areas for potential collaboration.

Table 3: Key Challenges and Opportunities in Sino-Indian Relations

Domain	Challenges	Opportunities
Political	Border disputes, status competition	Multilateral cooperation, crisis management
Economic	Trade imbalances, technology competition	Market access, infrastructure development
Security	Military modernization, alliance dynamics	Confidence-building measures, arms control
Cultural	Competing narratives, identity conflicts	Cultural exchanges, people-to-people ties

6. Future Scenarios and Policy Implications: Based on the analysis of geopolitical and ontological security factors, several scenarios for the future of Sino-Indian relations and their implications for Asian order can be identified:

6.1 Scenario 1: Managed Competition: In this scenario, China and India successfully manage their competition while maintaining stable relations. Both countries recognize their mutual interests in avoiding conflict and focus on areas of cooperation while managing areas of disagreement.

Key Characteristics: Effective crisis management mechanisms Regular diplomatic engagement at all levels Expansion of economic cooperation Respect for each other's core interests Implications for Asian Order: Stable bipolar structure in Asia Effective multilateral institutions Reduced risk of conflict Enhanced regional prosperity

6.2 Scenario 2: Strategic Rivalry: This scenario involves intensified strategic competition between China and India, with limited cooperation and frequent tensions.

Key Characteristics: Persistent border tensions Military modernization and arms race Competition in third countries Limited economic cooperation Implications for Asian Order: Divided regional architecture Weakened multilateral institutions Increased risk of conflict Negative impact on regional growth

6.3 Scenario 3: Cooperative Partnership: In this optimistic scenario, China and India overcome their differences and develop a comprehensive partnership based on mutual respect and shared interests.

Key Characteristics: Resolution of major disputes Extensive economic cooperation Coordination in global governance Cultural and educational exchanges Implications for Asian Order: Stable and prosperous Asia Effective regional institutions Enhanced global influence of Asia Model for South-South cooperation

6.4 Policy Recommendations: Based on the analysis, several policy recommendations can be made for both China and India to better manage their relationship:

For China: Demonstrate sensitivity to India's ontological security concerns and recognize its aspirations for great power status Develop more transparent and predictable policies in the Indian Ocean region Engage in regular dialogue on border management and crisis prevention Explore opportunities for economic cooperation that benefit both countries

For India: Develop a more nuanced understanding of China's ontological security concerns Seek areas of cooperation while maintaining strategic autonomy Invest in crisis management capabilities and diplomatic engagement Balance relationships with other major powers while avoiding confrontational approaches

For the International Community: Support dialogue and confidence-building measures between China and India Encourage both countries to work together in multilateral forums Avoid policies that might exacerbate tensions between the two countries Promote economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges

Conclusion: The relationship between China and India represents one of the most critical factors shaping the future of Asian order. This research has demonstrated that understanding this relationship requires going beyond traditional geopolitical analysis to incorporate ontological security considerations. Both countries are driven not only by material security concerns but also by the need to maintain their identity and self-conception as major powers. The analysis reveals that the intersection of geopolitical competition and ontological security concerns creates a complex dynamic that can lead to both conflict and cooperation. Recent developments, including border tensions and diplomatic initiatives, illustrate how both countries navigate these competing pressures. The future of Asian order will largely depend on how China and India manage their relationship. The scenarios outlined in this study suggest that while strategic rivalry remains a possibility, there are also opportunities for managed competition or even cooperative partnership. The key lies in both countries' ability to address each other's ontological security concerns while managing their geopolitical differences. The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, scholars, and other stakeholders interested in Asian security and international relations. By better understanding the role of ontological security in Sino-Indian relations, it becomes possible to develop more effective strategies for managing this critical relationship and promoting stability in the Asian region. Future research should continue to explore the intersection of geopolitics and ontological security in other bilateral relationships and regional contexts. Additionally, more empirical research is needed to better understand how ontological security concerns influence specific policy decisions and diplomatic behaviors. The Sino-Indian relationship will continue to evolve as both countries grow in power and influence. Success in managing this relationship will require sustained effort, mutual understanding, and recognition that both geopolitical and ontological security concerns are legitimate and must be addressed in any sustainable solution to the challenges facing China-India relations and the broader Asian order.

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STRATEGIC AUTONOMY VS BALANCE OF POWER: INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA

Chandrabali Das

India's foreign policy, under the current dispensation, emphasizes strategic autonomy—the ability to make independent, sovereign choices—rooted in the ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and atmanirbharta (self-reliance). Originating from the Non-Alignment Movement kickstarted by Nehru in 1955, strategic autonomy offers an alternative to the Eurocentric concept of balance of power, which relies on shifting alliances among dominant powers in the interest of maintaining peace and stability. India's neutral stance in the Russo-Ukraine War, its balanced position in the Middle East and Sino-US trade tensions, cooperation with developing nations, and advocacy for UN reform reflect this autonomy. By refusing alignment with Western blocs and promoting multipolarity, India challenges dominant global power structures, advocating for a decolonized and inclusive international order.

Introduction

Foreign policy can never be defined as merely a couple of choices dictated by immediate contingencies but it is indeed the genuine depiction of long-term strategic visions, ideational traditions and normative Global perspectives. So far as the foreign policy of India is concerned, one of the key tensions that defines its trajectory is the eternal dilemma between strategic autonomy on the one hand and balance of power on the other hand. It would be utterly erroneous to consider this dilemma as just a technical issue of diplomacy. In fact it is a conceptual struggle over how India perceives itself, its role in the arena of world politics, and the global order it wishes to harness.

Content

The notion of strategic autonomy in Indian foreign policy is nothing new. It owes its origins to the very first phase of the Indian Foreign Policy structured immediately after independence from the colonial rule. Pandit Jawaharlal nehru was the architect of the foreign policy framed immediately after independence. Pandit Nehru consciously formulated the policy of Non-Alignment , supported by other Global Leaders notably, Tito of Yugoslavia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Nkruma of Ghana and Sukarno of Indonesia in the Bandung Conference of 1955 with the intention of enabling India to maintain equidistance from any of the Cold War blocs.[1] This cannot be certainly considered an opportunistic neutrality but it was indeed a sincere endeavor on the part of India to assert a robustly independent stance, unwilling to compromise its hard earned independence and sovereignty of choices, moral responsibility, and the profound eagerness of drafting a non-Eurocentric vision of global politics. The policy of Non-Alignment at that time and the doctrine of strategic autonomy of the present day, therefore, are nothing but the embodiment of India's utmost desire to remain free from coercion, resist getting entrapped in the ongoing super power rivalry and formulate policies which truly reflect its own developmental needs and civilizational ethos.

In contrast to the policy of strategic autonomy, the concept of balance of power is enormously founded in the dominantly Eurocentric tradition of international relations. Based on the foundational pillars of post-Westphalian diplomacy and documented through the Congress of Vienna and later Cold War dynamics, the theories of balance of power primarily conceptualize global stability as the product of circumfluent alliances with one or the other powerful and influential states. Smaller and weaker states, in this paradigm, are bound to remain peripheral with almost zero ability to shape the rules those govern world politics and therefore are left with no other option but adapt to them.[2] This practice of marginalization of the non-Western voices is not merely historical but continues to remain embedded in the prevalent structures of contemporary international politics, and explicitly reflected in the institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, where the dominance of the powerful countries of the Core remains pronounced.

If we genuinely require to problematize this issue we are sure to ask the following fundamental questions: Is India destined to navigate the tumultuous global politics through the logic of balancing dominant powers, or can it successfully transcend the Balance of Power model by asserting a distinctive vision? Can the policy of strategic autonomy at present and Non-Alignment of the post-independence days genuinely decolonize international relations, or will it eventually collapse into the realist necessities of balancing power? Does India's meticulous pursuit of non-alignment in the Cold War and its recent adoption of equidistant diplomacy in the Russo-Ukraine conflict, Sino-US trade war, and Middle Eastern crises represent continuity or adaptation?

If we are fortunate enough to get answers to these fundamental questions we will certainly be able to understand that India's dilemma is not simply a choice between two diplomatic tools but rather a fundamental conflict between two ontologies of world order: one based on the foundational pillar of Western realism and the other influenced by the ancient Indian civilizational thought.

Indian Civilizational Insights

Any serious discussion on India's foreign policy dilemmas must not lose sight of the fact that India's foreign policy choices are not merely reactive in nature but embedded in a civilizational consciousness that spans millennia. Unlike the paradigm of balance of power, which is enormously rooted in the European historical experience of wars, treaties, and shifting alliances, India's foreign policy approaches draw upon the principles of Rajdharma (the duties of a king), Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the whole World is a family), and Atmanirbharata (self-reliance).[3]

The concept of Rajdharma, derived from ancient Indian texts most notably the Mahabharata and the Arthashastra, emphasizes on the moral responsibilities of a legitimate ruler. Unlike Machiavelli's emphasis on raison d'état, Rajdharma does not believe in separating ethics from politics. Kautilya was bold enough to establish that statecraft undoubtedly involved realism along with power calculation, but it was never devoid of ethical responsibility towards the subjects irrespective of caste, class, faith or birth and the broader social order. In the context of foreign policy, Rajdharma advocates a vision of a responsible state—where India's ambition to become a significant power is not to be materialized at the expense of others but in the genuine interest of social justice and an egalitarian Global Order.[4] It is out of the urge to fulfil this Rajdharma that India has always been an ardent supporter of the World wide anti-imperialist movement, resisting oppression of the weaker states in the hands of the powerful states and wholeheartedly cooperating with the states of the underdeveloped and the developing World in the interest of the upliftment and development of the latter. History stands witness to the fact that whenever any country, be it anywhere in the World has been subject to any form of crisis or disaster, India has stood in its support without any condition.[5] This is nothing but the reflection of India's selfless devotion to the principle of Rajdharma. Recently on 11th September, 2025 India felt pride to announce a Special Economic Package for Mauritius worth 680 million US dollars in health, infrastructure and maritime security sectors with the intention to support the needs and priorities of Mauritius. Similarly whenever any neighboring country has fallen victim to any form of disaster be it Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Srilanka, India has been prompt in its response to the suffering nation.

Perhaps the most powerful civilizational insight that has constructed India's global outlook is Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—"the world is one family." This idea propagates inclusivity, peaceful coexistence, and mutual cooperation, disapproving the zero-sum assumptions of balance of power politics promoted by the dominant Eurocentric approach to International Politics.[6] India has always located international relations within a family metaphor, thereby articulating a relational ontology that propagates the view that global security can never be built on exclusion and competition but has to be established through dialogue, diplomacy, solidarity, and shared responsibilities.

India's repeated emphasis on self-reliance—be it in economic, technological, or security domains—is undoubtedly linked to the principle of strategic autonomy. A nation that remains dependent upon the powerful nations for economic, technological or security reasons can never exercise autonomy in the sphere of foreign policy. India has been gaining self sufficiency in various spheres especially in the areas of defense, security and the economy[7] and through this atmanirbharta India has attained a robust self confidence with which it can design its sovereign and independent foreign policy. Ever since after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine War the Western powers particularly speaking the USA have been adopting pressure tactics to compel India to stop purchasing crude oil from Russia. But

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India has been firm and steady enough to refuse to toe the line of the USA thereby inviting additional 25 percent of tariff over the already imposed tariffs. Not only that India's outright rejection of the US claim that it was President Donald Trump who had been instrumental in brokering the ceasefire between India and Pakistan after the terror attack on the tourists of Pahalgam and the subsequent Operation Sindoor launched by India to destabilise the terror infrastructure of Pakistan has proved that India prefers strategic autonomy to the traditional balance of power.

The recent foreign policy overture displayed by India in the form of extension of hands of cooperation towards China by repairing the damage caused by border tensions with the latter as noticeable in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet in Tianjin that proves the fact that India prefers not to be dictated by super powers but to exercise its sovereign choices when it comes to foreign policy.[8] Immediately after US imposed 50 percent tariff on the imports from India it actively pursued and meticulously expanded its bilateral trade network as a key segment of its independent economic strategy. This strategy of diversification is nothing but a response to the trade uncertainty with the USA. and is intended to provide India with larger negotiating leverage. Alongside these recent trends, India's policies on consistent nuclear self-sufficiency, indigenous defense manufacturing, and pronounced digital sovereignty require to be considered as enormous political projects aimed at insulating the nation from undue external coercion.[9]

The triumvirate of Rajdharma, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Atmanirbharta also offers India a magnificent platform to challenge the Eurocentric monopoly of International relations theory. While the traditional Eurocentric IR theories have prioritized sovereignty, power, and competition, Indian perspectives underscore cooperation, ethical responsibility, and multipolarity. The dominant Realist theory of International Relations has projected the competitive nature of states asserting the impossibility of cooperation among nation states in the interest of maximizing power. But opposing this hard core Realist approach to International Relations, India has proved the inevitability of interdependence and cooperation among nation states through her foreign policy designs[10]. This is not mere cultural romanticism but a genuine endeavor to attain epistemic decolonization—creating some space for the narratives of Global South in the international order.

This civilizational grounding has been consistently manifesting itself in the recent foreign policy trends of India: the deliberate adoption of a neutral stance in the Russia-Ukraine war reflects not indecisiveness on the part of India but an assertion of independence from Western coercion. Its role in the Middle East peace process and in bridging the Sino-US trade rivalry demonstrates its unconditional and sincere commitment to dialogue.[11]

India's stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict has long been characterized by an exquisite balancing act—founded in the long nurtured historical solidarity with Palestine, strategic partnership with Israel, and its wider geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Gradually as we find the usual Israel Palestine conflict escalating beyond Gaza into a regional holocaust involving Hezbollah, Iran, Houthi rebels, and the resulting direct confrontations between Israel and Iran, India's diplomatic stance is turning out to be increasingly momentous—India can no more afford to remain a mere observer, but as a bridge between the conflicting blocs.

Historically, India emerged as the first non-Arab state to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 and expressed a robust political and moral support for the materialisation of Palestinian statehood throughout the 20th century. This was partly influenced by India's long and sincere commitment to anti-colonial struggle, the principles of Non-Alignment, and the pro-Palestinian sentiment of a significant Muslim population. However, simultaneously, since the 1990s, India also could not resist itself from cultivating a profound strategic partnership with Israel—particularly in defense and intelligence keeping in view the rising terror infrastructure in the neighbouring Pakistan and the consistent state sponsored terror attacks by Pakistan, partnership in the areas of agriculture, and technology. The result is that today, Israel has emerged as India's third-largest arms supplier and a critical partner in the sectors of counterterrorism and cybersecurity.[12]

This dual alignment has located India in a unique position so far as the customary Israel Palestine conflict is concerned. Following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on southern Israel and the subsequent Israeli large-scale military counter offensive in Gaza, India initially adopted a careful stance. While rightly condemning terrorism in true spirit and demonstrating concern over civilian casualties, New Delhi consciously avoided explicit criticism of Israel's military counter offensive—a move that invited the most expected condemnation from the Arab states and the supporters of the Palestinian cause inside India. But at the same time India also delicately balanced this act by abstaining from voting on key UN resolutions which demanded humanitarian ceasefires, thereby signalling an unusual discomfort with one-sided narratives.[13]

As the war escalated regionally—with the Iranian-backed Hezbollahs targeting U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria, Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping lanes, Israeli strikes on Beirut and Damascus, and the resulting fears of a full fledged war between Israel and Hezbollah or Iran—India's strategic position evolved from unassertive neutrality to vigorous diplomacy. New Delhi stoutly claimed that regional instability in any form directly threatens its national interests particularly keeping in view the interests of over 8 million Indian citizens residing in the Gulf whose remittances exceed $100 billion annually, and the harm caused to the uninterrupted energy security ,oil and gas flows from the Persian Gulf region. By adopting a stance which prioritises the National interest of the country and its citizens over and above everything else India truly displayed strategic autonomy so far as its foreign policy revolving around the Middle Eastern crisis was concerned. Here India was neither driven by the fear of incurring the wrath of the Arab states by refusing to outrightly condemn Israeli offensive nor by the fear of losing the scope of bonhomie with Israel in the interest of defence, agriculture or intelligence related assistance. In this case the national interest and that of millions of Indians settled in the Gulf region whose remittances contribute to the economic growth of the nation genuinely achieved priority.

India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, embarked on high-profile diplomatic missions across the Middle East in late 2023 and early 2024, engaging in effective dialogue with the leaders in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, and Israel. These visits were designed with a definite objective in sight. They highlighted India's eagerness to be viewed not as a partisan actor but as a responsible stakeholder committed to de-escalation, peaceful coexistence and mutual cooperation.[14] India had repeatedly asserted that the contemporary global situation demanded fruitful resolution of all conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy and called for humanitarian pause to the ongoing conflict in Gaza killing thousands of innocent civilians, wholeheartedly supported the expansion of aid corridors into Gaza, and advocated for a two-state solution based on the foundational pillars of International law and United Nations resolutions. These positions of India are indeed consistent with its longstanding commitment to peace, mutual interdependence and stability in the Global political order. These are now delivered with renewed urgency.

Crucially, India has emerged as a reliable leading voice of the Global South. Being the chair of the G20 in 2023, India left no stone unturned to ensure that the Israel-Palestine issue remained on the agenda despite strong resistance put up by the West, thereby enabling the developing nations to voice collective concern without being marginalised as anti-Israel. India also endeavoured to strengthen ties with the African Union and OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation), establishing itself as a mediator who respects the rights of the Palestinian people without compromising Israeli security concerns.[15]

India's steadily rising economic leverage further assists in amplifying its influence. With its rapidly expanding market and demand for the energy supplied by the Gulf countries, India bears the potential to incentivize moderation. For example, India's participation in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and its investments in ports like Chabahar (Iran) and Khalifa (UAE) strengthen it to work towards the direction of the attainment of regional stability.[16] By promoting the International North South Corridor India has effectively offered a reliable alternative to the Belt Road Initiative introduced by People's Republic of China and at the same time has been successful in subtly encouraging the Gulf states to avoid radicalization and maintain effective channels of dialogue—even with adversaries.

Moreover, India has been quietly playing a logistical role in evacuating thousands of foreign nationals—including Israelis and Palestinians—from conflict zones, effectively using its diplomatic network and naval assets. It has also contributed significantly to the running of humanitarian flights bringing medical supplies to Gaza via Egypt and Jordan, often coordinating with the UN and NGOs.

However, the fact remains that India faces mounting domestic pressure. So far as the Hindu nationalist groups are concerned they have expressed sympathy for Israel's right to self-defense, while the Muslim organizations and leftist parties stand in favour of stronger condemnation of Israeli "genocide" and advocate for the severance of defence and all forms of ties with Israel. It lies up to the Government of India to navigate these contradictions carefully, avoiding unnecessary polarization at home while maintaining credibility abroad.

Looking ahead, India's role is likely to grow even more pivotal if a wider regional conflict erupts in the Middle East. Should Iran retaliate against Israel with ballistic missiles or if Hezbollah dares to launch a full-scale invasion of northern Israel, India is sure to find itself uniquely positioned to conciliate through backchannel diplomacy. With no colonial baggage in the region and strong relationships across sectarian and ideological lines, India stands arguably as the only committed state capable of speaking the truth to both Tel Aviv and Tehran.

In the overall analysis, India's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict reflects a mature and rational foreign policy—one that rejects binary choices and embraces multi-alignment. As the Middle East gradually advances towards a broader conflict, India is emerging not as a traditional ally of either side, but as a reliable voice dedicated to the genuine advocacy of peace, humanitarian relief, and a negotiated political solution best suited to the interest of a multipolar world. Its success will depend on sustaining this balanced posture amid global pressures—and rightly proving that diplomacy, and not the power of guns and artillery, still bear the potential to shape the fate of nations.

India's insistence on the necessary reforms in the structure of the United Nations Security Council and greater representation for the Global South emphasizes on its vision of an inclusive order. In these ways, India's civilizational insights truly present a counter-narrative to the Western concept of balance of power politics and offer a model of ethical multipolarity.

Issues, Challenges and Reflexive Engagement

While the vision of strategic autonomy founded in the civilizational values of Rajdharma, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Atma nirvarta is compelling, its realization is certainly fraught with challenges.

The current international system no matter howsoever appears to be drifting towards multipolarity, undoubtedly remains dominated by Western-designed institutions. The UN Security Council, IMF, and World Bank continue to sustain the power inequalities of the mid-20th century. India's demand for reform of the existing Western dominated International Order has faced resistance from entrenched powers, limiting its ability to reshape rules.

Despite its civilizational ethos, India is compelled to operate in a realist environment. The rise of the authoritarian People's Republic of China as an expansionist power, the growing volatility in Pakistan, and the strategic assertiveness of the United States compel India to engage in balancing behavior. The Quad alliance, defense agreements with the U.S., and partnerships with Japan and Australia prove that strategic autonomy often requires to coexist with pragmatic balancing.

India's pursuit of self-reliance is repeatedly endangered by economic challenges, technological gaps, and dependencies on other nations for meeting its defense requirements. A weak domestic base certainly does not encourage external autonomy, making India vulnerable to global supply chains and energy markets.

India's refusal to condemn Russia in its act of attacking Ukraine was appreciated and celebrated as a manifestation of strategic autonomy domestically but criticized as opportunism abroad. It was believed that in order to procure oil and natural gas at a relatively less price from Moscow India refrained from criticizing Russia's act of aggression on Ukraine. Similarly, India's position in the U.S.-China rivalry is many a times projected as a strategy that lacks enough clarity. Thus, projecting strategic autonomy without alienating partners remains a diplomatic tightrope.[17]

The real challenge for India is to transform the policy of strategic autonomy from defensive non-alignment into a positive and more assertive global vision. This requires introspection on multiple fronts: intellectual introspection in developing the indigenous theories of International Relations; diplomatic introspection in ensuring that the civilizational ideals in the form of Rajdharma, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Atma Nirvarta translate into actionable policies; economic introspection in building self-reliance in the true sense of the term without being dependent upon the procurement of arms from outside nations for ensuring safety and normative introspection in balancing ethical commitments with realist necessities.

Ultimately, India's dilemma is not unsolvable. It is not essential that Strategic autonomy and balance of power have to be binaries. By carefully designing partnerships without alliances, formulating dialogue without submission, and autonomy without isolation, India can devise a third alternative—a decolonized vision of global politics where multipolarity remains ethical, inclusive, and sustainable.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy dilemma between strategic autonomy and balance of power is both historical and contemporary, both theoretical and practical. Rooted in the civilizational ethos of Rajdharma and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, strategic autonomy challenges Eurocentric paradigms of power politics and aspires to decolonize global order. Yet, structural constraints, realist pressures, and domestic limitations make its practice quite complicated. The way forward lies in reflexive engagement—balancing ideals with pragmatism, ethics with power, autonomy with cooperation.

If India succeeds in balancing its ideals with real politik, its morality with its crave for securing a powerful position in the Global arena and strategic autonomy with whole hearted cooperation, it can genuinely secure its own sovereignty; leading to its contribution in a sincere reconstruction of international relations itself—shifting from a narrative of domination to one of justice, plurality, and shared humanity.

That India has already embarked upon its mission of attaining an assertive Global vision and self reliance in the true sense of the term is proved from the fact that India has adequately developed its Air Force with the most advanced and technologically upgraded weapons. When the Indian Air Force destabilized the terror infrastructure of Pakistan through Operation Sindoor within just 4 days the entire World observed the enormous empowerment of air power of India and the self reliance attained by making the air power the preferred and the first instrument of statecraft extending beyond traditional diplomacy. The modern and the most advanced air weapons include the Rafale, Sukhoi Su-30MKI and the MIG-29 fighter jets, the Netra AEW&C, the C-17 Globemaster III and C-130J Hercules, the Apache attack helicopter fitted with Longbow radar, the advanced Light Helicopter, the Akash Surface-to-Air Missile System and the S-band Rohini radar.[18] India's journey towards materializing its civilizational ideals in the form of Rajdharma, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Atma Nirvarta has already commenced and the day is not very far when the World will see how India has become profoundly capable of designing partnerships without alliances, formulating dialogue without submission, and has emerged successful in designing a third alternative—that is a completely decolonized version of global politics where plurality, mutual interdependence and multipolarity have become ethical, inclusive, and sustainable.

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INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE US: IMPLICATIONS FOR A FUTURE MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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The foundation of India's external outlook was laid by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who envisioned an independent foreign policy rooted in non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and solidarity with the decolonizing world. These principles, later articulated in the Panchsheel framework, underlined India's desire to steer clear of power blocs and act as a moral voice in global politics.[1] During the Cold War, however, this idealism came under strain as India leaned towards the Soviet Union for political and defence support, while the United States courted Pakistan as a regional ally. The result was a persistent lack of trust that lasted for decades

Introduction

India's foreign policy towards the United States has traversed an extraordinary from mutual suspicion and estrangement during the Cold War to an expanding and multi-dimensional partnership in the twenty-first century. This evolution reflects not only the shifts in the international system but also India's own transformation from a developing post-colonial state into an aspiring global power. The relationship today stands at a crucial juncture, it has grown deeper and more institutionalized than ever before, yet India remains cautious about preserving what it proudly calls *strategic autonomy*. The foundation of India's external outlook was laid by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who envisioned an independent foreign policy rooted in non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and solidarity with the decolonizing world. These principles, later articulated in the Panchsheel framework, underlined India's desire to steer clear of power blocs and act as a moral voice in global politics.[1] During the Cold War, however, this idealism came under strain as India leaned towards the Soviet Union for political and defence support, while the United States courted Pakistan as a regional ally. The result was a persistent lack of trust that lasted for decades.[2]

By the early 1990s, the end of bipolar rivalry and India's own economic liberalization altered the calculus of foreign policy. New Delhi began to pursue relations on the basis of pragmatic national interest rather than ideological loyalty. This marked the beginning of a gradual convergence with Washington driven by shared democratic values, mutual security concerns, and growing economic interdependence. The twenty-first century, particularly after the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement, has witnessed a major redefinition of bilateral ties. What was once characterized by suspicion is now increasingly described in terms of "strategic partnership." This paper argues that India's evolving relationship with the United States is not merely a bilateral story of cooperation but a critical component of the emerging multipolar world order. India's challenge lies in leveraging American partnership for technological, defence, and developmental gains while maintaining an independent and credible voice in global governance. Through a careful balance of alignment and autonomy, India seeks to position itself as a bridge power ie one capable of mediating between the industrialized North and the developing South, between major powers and smaller nations. The analysis proceeds in several stages. First, it outlines the historical evolution of India-U.S. relations to highlight the turning points that redefined mutual perceptions. Second, it explores the meaning of *strategic autonomy* and how India has reinterpreted it in an age of complex interdependence. Third, it assesses the major domains of bilateral cooperation defence, economy, technology, and people-to-people engagement while acknowledging the tensions that continue to shape the partnership. Finally, it situates the relationship in the context of a rapidly changing international system where power is diffusing across multiple centres rather than concentrated in one. The paper adopts a qualitative approach, drawing upon official policy documents, speeches, and scholarly literature to trace both continuity and change in India's foreign policy orientation. By doing so, it seeks to understand whether closer engagement with the United States enhances India's agency in the world or risks diluting its longstanding commitment to pluralism and independent decision-making.

Historical Evolution of India-U.S. Relations: The trajectory of India–U.S. relations since 1947 can be divided into three broad phases: the period of estrangement during the Cold War (1947–1991), the era of pragmatic engagement following India's liberalization (1991–2005), and the current phase of comprehensive strategic partnership (2005–present). Each phase reflects not only shifting geopolitical realities but also evolving perceptions of national interest on both sides. 1947–1991: Estrangement and Misunderstanding: In the first decades after independence, India's insistence on non-alignment often clashed with the United States' expectation of bloc loyalty. Washington viewed New Delhi's reluctance to join Western alliance's such as SEATO or CENTO as evidence of ideological ambiguity. For India, however, alignment with any power bloc was incompatible with the freedom it had just regained from colonial rule. Nehru's approach sought to preserve policy space for the developing world to act independently of superpower pressures.[3] The divergence deepened during the Cold War's crises. U.S. military and financial support to Pakistan alienated India, which perceived it as a direct threat to its security. Conversely, the United States was frustrated by India's criticism of Western interventionism, and its growing defence ties with Moscow. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971, signed on the eve of the Bangladesh Liberation War, marked a decisive moment of realignment. While it guaranteed Soviet support during a regional conflict, it further widened the rift with Washington.[4]

1991–2005: Pragmatic Reorientation: The disintegration of the Soviet Union and India's balance-of-payments crisis in 1991 compelled New Delhi to rethink its external relations. Economic reforms and the pursuit of global markets demanded a more flexible foreign policy. This period saw the beginning of quiet engagement between India and the United States, first in trade and investment, and gradually in security cooperation. Despite the optimism, challenges persisted. India's nuclear tests in 1998 prompted U.S. sanctions and international criticism. Yet, paradoxically, these very tests opened the door for strategic dialogue. Strobe Talbott's extensive talks with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, recorded in his memoir *Engaging India*, reflected a growing recognition that India's nuclear status was a reality the world needed to accommodate rather than resist.[5] By the early 2000s, both countries identified converging interests in combating terrorism, maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific, and promoting democratic values. 2005–Present: Comprehensive Global Partnership: The 2005 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement symbolized a turning point. For the first time, Washington recognized India as a responsible nuclear power outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty framework, effectively legitimizing its nuclear status.[6] This diplomatic breakthrough was followed by a steady institutionalization of cooperation across multiple fronts like defence, energy, education, and technology. Strategically, India's inclusion in forums such as the Quad, and its participation in joint military exercises like *Malabar*, underscored a deepening convergence on the Indo-Pacific region's security architecture. At the same time, the partnership retained an asymmetrical character: while the U.S. saw India as a counterweight to China, India sought to avoid being drawn into a binary competition. Its emphasis remained on building a "multi-aligned" foreign policy that engages all major powers without compromising independence. Today, India-U.S. relations rest on three pillars namely, shared democratic values, economic complementarity, and strategic convergence but these are tempered by differing worldviews. India's consistent insistence on autonomy, even within deepening cooperation, reveals an approach that is pragmatic rather than dependent. As subsequent sections of this paper will argue, this very pragmatism allows India to turn partnership into power and bilateralism into a means of strengthening multipolarity.

India's Strategic Autonomy and Its Reinterpretation: The idea of *strategic autonomy* has long been a defining thread in India's foreign policy thinking. Rooted in Nehruvian thought, it emerged from the conviction that India, newly freed from colonial domination, must retain the freedom to make decisions in accordance with its own national interests rather than conform to the dictates of any great power. In the early years of the Cold War, this concept found expression through the policy of non-alignment, which sought to preserve India's independence in a world polarized between the U.S. led Western bloc and the Soviet led camp. Strategic autonomy, therefore, was not isolationism, it was a deliberate assertion of sovereign choice and moral leadership, reflecting India's self-image as an advocate of peace and equity in international affairs.

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In the post–Cold War period, as the global landscape became more complex, India reinterpreted strategic autonomy to suit a world of economic interdependence and multidimensional power. The collapse of the Soviet Union deprived India of a long-standing partner, compelling New Delhi to diversify its diplomatic engagements. Strategic autonomy thus evolved from non-alignment to what scholars now call *multi-alignment which is* a flexible and pragmatic policy that enables India to build partnerships with multiple powers simultaneously without being drawn into rigid alliances.[7] This new approach is evident in India's foreign policy choices over the past two decades. Its acquisition of the S-400 missile system from Russia, despite the risk of U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), demonstrates a firm resolve to retain independent defence procurement decisions. Likewise, India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) alongside the U.S., Japan, and Australia reflects its willingness to cooperate on shared regional concerns, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Yet India has carefully avoided transforming the QUAD into a military alliance, emphasizing instead its character as a platform for ensuring a free, open, and inclusive region. Former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon has observed that strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century is less about distancing from power centres and more about enhancing India's capacity to make independent choices amid global interdependence.[8] India's diplomacy, in this sense, embodies both *realist prudence* and *constructivist adaptability*. It is realist, because it seeks to safeguard national interests in an anarchic international system; constructivist, because it aims to shape global norms through moral persuasion and developmental partnerships. By redefining autonomy not as detachment but as agency, India has found a way to reconcile its past principles with the demands of an interconnected world.

Areas of India-U.S. Cooperation: In the twenty-first century, India and the United States have cultivated a broad-based partnership that spans defence, trade, technology, climate cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. This deepening engagement underscores the recognition that the world's two largest democracies share not only converging strategic interests but also complementary economic and technological strengths.

Defence and Security Cooperation: Defence cooperation has emerged as the cornerstone of the bilateral relationship. Over the past decade, India and the U.S. have signed several foundational agreements, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA, 2016), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA, 2018), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA, 2020).[9] These frameworks enable reciprocal access to military facilities, secure communication channels, and geospatial intelligence sharing, thereby enhancing interoperability between their armed forces. The annual *Malabar* naval exercises, which also involve Japan and Australia, have further strengthened joint operational capabilities and reaffirmed a shared commitment to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. From a strategic standpoint, these developments signify India's growing comfort in collaborating with the U.S. while remaining cautious about formal alliance commitments. For Washington, India is an indispensable partner in preserving a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific but for New Delhi, the partnership provides access to advanced defence technologies and a deterrent posture without compromising its autonomy.[10]

Economic and Technological Collaboration: On the economic front, bilateral trade between India and the U.S. has grown exponentially, surpassing USD 107 billion in 2022. The relationship has expanded beyond traditional goods trade into high-technology domains such as artificial intelligence, space cooperation, and semiconductor manufacturing. The *India–U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET)*, launched in 2023, aims to align both countries' strengths in innovation and research, particularly in defence technology, quantum computing, and 5G/6G communications. American investments in India's digital and startup ecosystems have also transformed the relationship from transactional trade to strategic technology partnership. U.S. firms such as Google, Microsoft, and Apple have deepened their presence in India, while Indian tech talent continues to play a vital role in the U.S. innovation economy. This growing integration of digital economies has added a new dimension to the bilateral partnership that is one based on innovation, data governance, and shared democratic values in technology policy.

Energy and Climate Diplomacy: Energy security and climate cooperation form another key pillar. Both nations collaborate through platforms like the *International Solar Alliance (ISA)* and *Mission Innovation* to accelerate clean energy transitions. India's commitment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2070 aligns with U.S. efforts to promote green finance and renewable technology transfers. Joint projects supported by the *NITI Aayog–USAID Clean Energy Task Force* have facilitated investments in solar grids, electric mobility, and sustainable infrastructure.[11] This shared focus on climate resilience not only strengthens bilateral relations but also enhances India's leadership in global sustainability dialogues.

Education and People-to-People Ties: Perhaps the most enduring link between the two countries is the vibrant Indian diaspora in the United States numbering over four million. The diaspora serves as a bridge of trust and collaboration, influencing business, academia, and public policy. Indian origin professionals occupy prominent positions in Silicon Valley, the U.S. Congress, and global institutions, reflecting a cultural synergy that underpins strategic cooperation. Educational exchanges have also flourished, with more than 250,000 Indian students currently enrolled in U.S. universities, contributing to mutual understanding and long-term goodwill. Collectively, these areas of cooperation represent the multidimensional nature of India-U.S. relations which is a partnership that blends strategic necessity with shared aspirations for a stable, rules-based international order.

Tensions and Challenges in Bilateral Relations: Despite the visible progress, India-U.S. relations are not free of friction. Beneath the rhetoric of partnership lie structural and ideological differences that periodically test the resilience of the relationship. A major source of tension stems from U.S. criticism of India's domestic political trends, particularly concerning human rights and freedom of expression. Periodic reports from American institutions and statements from congressional leaders have raised concerns about democratic backsliding, to which India has responded by asserting that such evaluations reflect a lack of understanding of its internal dynamics. While these issues rarely derail cooperation, they create diplomatic unease and reinforce India's sensitivity to external moral scrutiny.[12] Trade disputes have also emerged as recurring irritants. The U.S. decision to withdraw India's benefits under the *Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)* in 2019, coupled with India's data localization policies and tariffs on agricultural goods, has led to periodic standoffs. Analysts at Brookings have noted that while trade volumes continue to rise, negotiations on a comprehensive trade agreement remain slow due to differing approaches toward protectionism and regulatory autonomy.[13] Another layer of complexity is India's continued defence partnership with Russia. While Washington has sought to wean India away from Russian systems, New Delhi maintains that its relationship with Moscow is indispensable for maintaining defence self-sufficiency and geopolitical balance. This divergence has become more visible since the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with India refusing to join Western sanctions while emphasizing diplomacy and dialogue. Differences also persist over West Asia. India's pragmatic relations with Iran, necessary for energy security and connectivity projects like Chabahar, often conflict with U.S. sanctions policy. Similarly, while both nations support Israel, India balances this by maintaining its traditional solidarity with Palestine. These contradictions illustrate that India's foreign policy, though increasingly convergent with U.S. objectives, remains guided by plural interests rather than alignment logic. Underlying these tensions is the broader concern that excessive strategic intimacy could lead to dependency. For India, preserving decision-making independence remains paramount but for the U.S., ensuring predictability in India's choices is a persistent challenge. Managing this paradox will determine the durability of the partnership in the decades ahead.

India-U.S. Relations and the Emerging Multipolar World: The reconfiguration of global power in the post unipolar era provides the strategic backdrop to India-U.S. engagement. The relative decline of U.S. hegemony, the resurgence of China, and the rise of regional middle powers have ushered in an increasingly multipolar world order. Within this setting, India's foreign policy seeks not subordination to any bloc but participation as an autonomous centre of influence. India today functions as a *swing state* like a power whose choices can shape regional and global alignments. Its collaboration with the U.S. on the Indo-Pacific strategy aims to promote a rules-based order and freedom of navigation without explicitly framing itself as an anti-China coalition. While Washington emphasizes containment of China, India prefers strategic balance, recognizing the need to engage Beijing through dialogue and multilateral mechanisms. This nuanced approach exemplifies India's contribution to what Amitabh Mattoo terms "bridge diplomacy". A balancing function that connects competing poles of power rather than reinforcing their divisions.[14] Beyond security, India and the U.S. share a mutual interest in reforming global governance institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Both advocate for a more representative order that reflects contemporary

realities rather than Cold War hierarchies. India's push for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, supported in principle by the U.S., aligns with its broader objective of democratizing international institutions. The concept of *multi-alignment* encapsulates India's strategy in this new order. Instead of adhering to fixed alliances, India cultivates issue-based coalitions, whether in the QUAD, BRICS, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Reports from the Observer Research Foundation highlight that this flexible engagement allows India to act as both a partner of the West and a voice of the Global South, positioning it uniquely among emerging powers.[15] In this emerging multipolar system, the India–U.S. relationship acquires significance not as an alliance of dependency but as a partnership of convergence. The success of this relationship will depend on whether both sides can accept asymmetry as a strength rather than a limitation leveraging cooperation while respecting the plural nature of global power.

India's Role in Global Multilateral Forums: India's growing global presence is best illustrated through its active participation in multilateral forums. As the 2023 G20 President, India articulated a vision of *"One Earth, One Family, One Future,"* emphasizing inclusivity and the developmental needs of the Global South.[16] Its success in ensuring consensus on the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration underscored its diplomatic ability to bridge divisions between the West and emerging economies, particularly on contentious issues such as the Ukraine conflict and climate finance. India's engagement with BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization further demonstrates its belief in issue-based coalitions rather than rigid alignments. Through BRICS, India advocates for financial reform and South-South cooperation; within the QUAD, it pushes for technological collaboration and regional stability. This coexistence of memberships across divergent blocs reflects India's conviction that multipolarity must be inclusive, not adversarial. India's climate diplomacy has also taken on global resonance. By promoting the International Solar Alliance and sharing its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) framework with developing nations, India positions itself as a provider of sustainable solutions rather than a passive recipient of global aid. At the United Nations General Assembly, Indian representatives have repeatedly invoked the ethos of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the belief that the world is one family to advocate for cooperative and humane globalization.[17] In essence, India's multilateral activism reinforces its larger foreign policy objective shaping a multipolar world that reflects diversity of power, voice, and vision.

Policy Implications and Future Prospects: Looking ahead, India's partnership with the United States must evolve in a way that strengthens its autonomy rather than constrains it. To achieve this, several policy directions are evident.

1. First, India should institutionalize its strategic dialogues with the U.S. through mechanisms that ensure predictability without rigidity. Structured engagements in areas such as defence innovation, climate finance, and digital governance can help both countries navigate differences while expanding cooperation.
2. Second, India's emphasis should remain on *technology sovereignty*. While the U.S. is a vital partner in high-end research, India must simultaneously invest in domestic capabilities and regional supply chain resilience. Initiatives like *Make in India* and *Digital India* should serve as vehicles for strategic independence, not dependency.
3. Third, the partnership must align with sustainable development objectives. Collaboration on clean energy, climate adaptation, and inclusive growth can transform bilateral cooperation into a model for global governance.
4. Finally, India should continue to champion South-South solidarity. As its global stature rises, it bears the responsibility of ensuring that its engagement with the U.S. complements, rather than undermines, its leadership in the Global South. This dual responsibility to partner with the West while empowering the developing world will define India's success as an architect of multipolarity.[18]

Conclusion

India's foreign policy towards the United States captures the broader transformation of global politics in the twenty-first century. What began as a cautious dialogue between unequal's has matured into a partnership grounded in shared interests and mutual respect. Yet the essence of India's approach remains constant which is an unyielding commitment to strategic autonomy. India's ability to deepen ties with the U.S. without succumbing to dependency reflects the evolution of its diplomatic philosophy from non-alignment to multi-alignment, from moral posturing to pragmatic engagement. As the world moves irreversibly toward multipolarity, India stands poised not merely as a participant but as a shaping force which is one capable of bridging divides, fostering inclusion, and ensuring that the global order remains equitable and balanced. In this delicate dance between autonomy and alignment, India's diplomacy continues to embody a timeless principle to engage with all, align with none, and lead with independence of thought and purpose.

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WORKING OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Deba Rajgond

India stands as the largest democracy globally, measured by the number of voters. The international community has recognized and appreciated our democratic system. Since gaining independence, India has operated as a responsible democracy. The legislative, executive, and judicial branches have been functioning effectively. Free and fair periodic elections have been held for all political positions, ranging from local government to the presidency. Political power has transitioned smoothly between different parties at both national and state levels. Notably, significant legislation such as the Right to Information Act of 2005, the Right to Education Act of 2009, the Public Service Guarantee Acts, the establishment of the Women's Commission, the SC/ST Commission, the Backward and Minorities Commission, and various welfare initiatives have empowered the populace. The mass media, encompassing both print and electronic formats, enjoys full autonomy and plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing public opinion. However, evaluating the success of democracy solely based on these developments is insufficient. Certain essential prerequisites for the effective functioning of democracy are lacking. Challenges arise from both domestic and international circumstances. In our country, democracy has diminished to merely the act of holding elections.

Key words: democracy, procedural, substantive, legislative, executive, judicial, mass media

Introduction: Democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people." This is why democracy cannot survive without citizenship. Theoretically, citizenship confers membership, identity, values, and rights of participation and assumes a body of common political understanding.(1) A subject is a person who has no rights and freedom and under an authoritarian government. Subjects usually exist during the time of Kingdoms, while citizens are nationals of a democracy with rights and freedom. But, within the advent of representative democracies, citizens shifted from active citizenship to passive citizenship, which posed a challenge to democracy. Citizen participation is a key requirement for the stability of democracy.(2) Due to the lack of popular support and participation, authoritarian forces in governance can use the government for their own interests. Therefore, active citizenship is important in a democracy.

Democracy and Citizenship: Democracy relies on informed and active citizens who participate in political and community life, holding both rights and responsibilities. This relationship is often referred to as democratic citizenship, emphasizing the crucial role citizens play in ensuring the health and sustainability of democratic societies through awareness, respect for institutions, and civic engagement. Democracy, meaning "government of the people, by the people, for the people," cannot exist without citizens who support and actively participate in its processes. For a citizen in a democracy, rights include legal protection of civil and political liberties, while duties involve obeying laws, contributing to common expenses and defending the nation. Democracy is built on the principle of equality, which defines citizenship by guaranteeing equal rights and responsibilities to all individuals, regardless of their background. Democratic citizenship goes beyond a passive legal status to include active engagement in society, recognizing that citizens' support is essential for a democracy's longevity. To be an active citizen, one must understand and respect democratic institutions like the electoral system, freedom of speech, and freedom of association. Democratic citizenship involves understanding the relationship between individual rights and collective obligations, balancing personal freedoms with the needs of the community and state. In societies with historical inequalities, such as caste and class divides, achieving strong democratic citizenship and overcoming challenges to democratic governance can be difficult. Education plays a vital role in fostering democratic citizenship by preparing individuals to participate in democratic processes, understand different forms of democracy and develop the competence to address societal challenges within a democratic framework.

Mapping the World's Largest Democracy: India stands as the largest democracy globally, measured by the number of voters. The democratic system of India enjoys a commendable reputation worldwide. Our democracy has garnered appreciation from the international community. Since gaining independence, India has operated as a responsible democracy. The legislative, executive, and judicial branches have been functioning effectively. The Parliament and State Legislatures exercise control over the Executives through various mechanisms. Free and fair periodic elections have been conducted for all political positions, ranging from local government to the presidency. There has been a seamless transfer of political power between political parties at both national and state levels. In contrast, we have observed numerous instances in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh, where power transitions have occurred through military coups. Notably, several important legislations, including the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, the Right to Education Act of 2009, Public Service Guarantee Acts, Citizens Charters, the establishment of the Women's Commission, the SC/ST Commission, the Backward and Minorities Commission and other welfare initiatives, have empowered the populace. The mass media, encompassing both print and electronic formats, operates with full autonomy and plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing public opinion. Significant social transformations have occurred across various sectors, propelling the nation towards socio-economic development. In neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, the populace tends to adhere to a specific religion. However, secularism has emerged as a robust ideal in India, despite facing numerous challenges. Over the course of 77 years of independence, the nation has made substantial progress and development. The living standards of the citizens have improved significantly. India has attained success in various domains, including agriculture, industry, education, medicine and space science. We are currently the fifth-largest economy in the world, with substantial reserves of foreign currency. There are specific factors that are used to evaluate the functioning of a country's democracy. These include socio-economic and political equality, government accountability, robust political participation, effective democratic institutions, free and fair elections, a deliberative legislature, adherence to the rule of law and the constitution, a commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance, a pro-democratic political culture, and the freedom of citizens. These elements are the hallmarks upon which our democracy is judged. What constitutes the success of a 77-year-old democracy? It is essential to examine the historical context of the past years, including achievements, development, socio-economic conditions and the happiness of the populace, among other factors. However, evaluating the success of democracy solely based on these developments is insufficient. There are certain essential prerequisites that are lacking for the effective functioning of democracy. Challenges arise from both existing domestic and international circumstances. These issues are elaborated upon below.

Challenges to Indian Democracy: Social inequalities are acute in India. According to Oxfam, 1% India's people controls 73% of the country's wealth. Thus social exclusion can be understood through three basic tenets of *complete and partial exclusion; and unfavourable inclusion.*(3) In case of complete exclusion or complete denial of services and access to resources; people are completely excluded from availing some services and accessing resources for whatever reasons. Although, the state entails to provide services to all without any discrimination, yet many are left without any access to and utilization of resources. There are services, opportunities and information to which access is denied completely to certain groups of people. Many a times some people have access to some services and not to other. This is partial denial of services and access to resources. People are discriminated by the services providers and co-users at the place of services delivery in terms of priority and proximity. This is partial denial of services and access to resources. Inequality is clearly visible in Indian society. If you show the picture of Mumbai metropolitan city and a remote village of Jharkhand to any layman the answer will be obvious. The society consists of various sections, groups and classes, each one of these tries to protect its own interests. The various interests often come into clash with each other. It is the function of the state to maintain peace by keeping this conflict within limits. This involves a changing allocation of resources (redistribution of resources). The state is expected to allocate resources to them justly and fairly. All should get access to the resources open to them as a member of the society or the state. The state can provide equal access to resources to its citizens such as employment, education, health services, social security schemes, which may be considered necessary for a dignified human life. But in reality these resources are not equally enjoyed by citizens, since their position due to individual traits (illiteracy, lack of skills, poverty) or by virtue of being a member of a deprived group (Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribe, Women, Minority, Unorganized Workers) does not facilitate them in having a share in those resources. Justice between classes is difficult to

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achieve because their interests often conflict. It is only if the government and the bureaucracy are seen to be neutral that the conflict can be kept within limits and peace maintained. The conflict between classes is greater in developing countries like India than in developed ones. Thus while a few are very rich, millions continue to go hungry. The very concept of social exclusion is not static; in fact, it is a process or the processes of marginalization and discrimination in the everyday lives and interaction. It excludes certain communities and groups from interaction and access to social resources through social arrangements, normative value systems and customs. The exclusion based on Caste is one example and Patriarchy is another, which is systemic or constitutive exclusion. Having social, cultural, political and economic ramifications, it is also complex and multi-dimensional concept. These dimensions are interwoven and it revolves around the societal interventions and institutions that exclude, discriminate, isolate and deprive some groups on the basis of group identities like caste and ethnicity. Discrimination and exclusion marginalizes certain groups from full participation in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the country. Amartya Sen described the two situations as 'unfavourable exclusion' and 'unfavourable inclusion.' The 'unfavourable inclusion' with unequal treatment may carry the same adverse effects as 'unfavourable exclusion'.[4] The concept of social exclusion essentially refers to the processes through which groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live.

Each group articulate their demands and put pressure on the state to get them fulfilled. This puts the state, the mediating institution, in a quandary. The pertinent question that emerges here is: what is to be prioritized Liberty or Justice? It is generally noticed that when the empowered groups vouch for Liberty, for the downtrodden, justice becomes a matter of survival. It is oblivious that in order to improve the social and economic position makes special provisions from them through reservations, constitutional provisions or through affirmative action. There is an absolute disparity on economic, social and political sphere between these two groups. This disparity and discrimination creates a sub- human life and a feeling of alienation of not being a part of the mainstream. If a class has the feeling that injustice is being done to it, it may take to the war path. The unprivileged are by and large poor, uneducated and unorganised. They have low social status and political power. They often do not even know how to improve their condition, and even if they try, the richer and more powerful sections frustrate their efforts. In order to bring back the marginalized groups to the mainstream and to assure them a dignified human life, the issue of 'Affirmative Action' comes into forefront. But as soon as the question of Affirmative Action' comes to the fore, it brings along a serious debate "Whether 'Affirmative Action' violates principle of fairness." [5] Any step to equalize the people in terms of income and resources by the state the intervention in the liberties of the individuals by the state is inevitable. In order to bring equality among the people in their income and resources the state interference is necessary. Intervention in the liberties of the individuals is justified. In short Equality for them is a prior concern than Liberty. [6] From the point of view of tax-revenue collection, the government is rich, but the public....? If we ask about the social and economic condition of the people, what efforts have been made to eliminate unemployment, reduce inequality, India's performance in these aspects is not remarkable. The country is not lacking anything, India is self-reliant in all areas yet about 360 million people in India are deprived of health, nutrition, education and sanitation and are forced to lead a miserable life. Gender equality is one of the basic principles of democracy. The Constitution of India enjoins upon the State to ensure that men and women are treated as equals and there is no discrimination against women. Fundamental Rights and Fundamental Duties as well as the Directive Principles of State Policy make these intensions very clear. It is a major problem to Indian democracy. India ranks 135th in the Gender Inequality Index published by the World Economic Forum. Discrimination against girls and women exists in every walk of life. In India, violence against women, both sexual and other, forms a root cause that reinforces gender inequalities in social, political and economic spheres.[7]

Western scholars criticize that Indian democracy is reduced to the level of elections. Democracy is graded as full democracy, partial democracy, hybrid or mixed democracy or authoritarian democracy. However, India's position on the democracy index is mixed. Democracy has two aspects-procedural and substantive. Democracy in our country has reduced to the level of elections. It refers to the procedural aspect of democracy. Moreover, instead of a real democracy, we are enjoying a procedural democracy; because it only follows the rules of democracy (elections every five years) etc. and not implement the spirit of democracy. Today, it is questionable in whose interest our democracy is working. We are focusing only on the process, means or means to achieve democracy. Our electoral process is the procedural consequence of democracy. Holding regular elections and creating a democratically elected government is a procedural consequence of a country's attainment of democracy. Procedural democracy is not real democracy. Voting in elections is used not as a right, but as a duty. Fundamental questions about the democratic system have been left far behind.

We have different faiths, beliefs and views towards the democratic system and government of India. To develop a democratic culture, the basic problems need to be solved first. So that a kind of political culture can be created and the democratic system can be successful. For the success of democracy, political parties must rise above their vested interests and try to fulfill the aspirations of the society. Successful democracy is a holistic concept. Poverty and illiteracy are the main reasons for low voter turnout. Many voters do not understand the importance of their right to vote. So democracy is meaningless without education. A healthy competition between the ruling and opposition parties is also needed. Parties need a progressive mindset rather than an opportunistic one. Elections in India should not be treated as a festival, rather should be seen as a cure for democracy. Democracy is a formal system for reaching a consensus decision on any issue of the country. A person gets the right to vote in a competitive struggle among the party leaders to be elected as a representative, but does not acquire decision-making power. People have no special role in any issue of the country after the election is over. Everything is done by people's representatives. Hence they are considered as "passive citizens" of the democracy. It emphasizes how to elect a democratic government and pays less attention to the freedom and autonomy of the people. In the absence of checks and balances on power, elected leaders can use the policy-making process and power for their own interests and benefits. Therefore, in a democratic system, the supreme power should be kept with the people.

Although elections are held periodically in these countries, power remains concentrated in one/few persons, group or party. This can be called the 'danger of elections', because the result of elections breed passive citizens. Electoral process is given more priority here than in other principles and ideologies of democracy. Some call it 'parochial democracy' because after elections citizens become passive citizens and elected representatives ignore constitutional limits on their powers and deprive citizens of their basic rights and liberties. Another challenge is that in terms of Voters' value Indian democracy is not glorious. Value Indian democracy is not glorious. A party/candidate with 37%, 38% or 39% votes rules the country. It means that a political party/representative who has been rejected by more than 60% of the voters rules the country. In the context of pluralism, the status of free and fair elections, political participation, political culture and civil liberties is commendable. But 'identity politics' is one of the major features of Indian politics. Voters tend to vote on the basis of party identity. [8] The parties formed on the basis of language, region, caste, religions have created their own permanent followers. Furthermore, it 'identity politics' have created permanent invisible divisions of India. Consent–dissent and Consensus-disagreement is an element of democracy. However due to the parallel co-existence or simultaneous presence of various systems, practices, opinions, opposing views India has become a prismatic society; as a result, social change has created inconsistencies. [9] Discriminatory administrative systems have also affected our democracy. In our society, the urban is the 'sophisticated', intellectual class having a Western life style. People in rural areas with low literacy and poverty lead a traditional life without any modern facilities. Its reflection can be seen in democracy. In terms of education, there are Western-style educations and traditional gurukuls, madrasas, in terms of health facility there are hospitals, Ayurvedic, Unani, homeopathic and allopathic centers. Leaders try to pull such a co-existing society towards their own advantages. Although equality exists for all in a democracy, political leaders and administrative officials enjoy enormous influence, power and prestige. Only a few succeed in earning enough money and access to opportunities, and those who fail form 'pressure groups' and agitate against the government. Government fails to control disaffected people. They ignore the factors that create unrest in the society due to vote bank politics.

The inconsistencies and conflicts between the working styles of different state governments and constitutional institutions are worrisome. There is a gap between society's 'stated objectives' and 'actual performance'. It is true that there is greater gap between constitutional provisions, law and its actual implementation. According to the constitutional provisions, the Chief Minister will be elected by the members of the majority party in the Assembly. But in most cases the central party leadership chooses the Chief Minister. Sometimes power is not in the hands of the elected representatives of the people, but in the hands of individuals or groups outside the parliament. It is the responsibility of the members of the legislature

to implement the law. In fact, they spend little time making laws and are more engaged in power politics. As a result, it helps to strengthen the bureaucracy.[10]

The fourth pillar of democracy in India, the media, has been questioned due to concerns over its independence, the spread of misinformation, and its role in shaping public opinion, with critics suggesting it has lost its ability to hold power accountable and sometimes serves political agendas. This questioning also highlights broader challenges to Indian democracy, such as increasing criminalization of politics, communal violence, and the need for greater transparency and institutional strength. The media's ability to remain independent and impartial, a key function of the fourth pillar, is often debated. There are concerns that it may succumb to political or corporate pressures. The rapid spread of misinformation, "fake news," and propaganda through media channels can distort public understanding and undermine democratic discourse. Critics point to instances where media outlets appear to favor specific political parties or ideologies, rather than providing objective news coverage. A strong media is expected to act as a watchdog, holding the executive, legislature, and judiciary accountable, but the media itself can also face questions about its own transparency and accountability. The questioning of the media's role occurs within a broader context of concerns about the overall health of Indian democracy, including political violence, the criminalization of politics, and threats to minority rights. To strengthen the fourth pillar and the democratic system, there is a call for promoting greater transparency, strengthening democratic institutions, and fostering a more inclusive and diverse political culture. Illiteracy acts as a significant impediment to democracy in India by hindering informed decision-making, limiting effective participation in political processes, and perpetuating socio-economic inequalities that undermine democratic principles. While the Indian electorate has shown maturity by participating in large numbers, a substantial portion of the population, particularly women, still faces literacy barriers that affect their ability to understand political issues, exercise their rights, and hold leaders accountable.

Illiteracy prevents citizens from understanding political programs and the implications of their votes, leading to the selection of candidates based on factors other than merit or their ability to serve the public good. A lack of literacy can lead to decreased participation in democratic processes, as individuals may feel less empowered to voice their opinions or engage with political institutions. Illiteracy is a major cause of inequality, and a democratic system requires citizens who are conscious of their rights and privileges. Without education, individuals are less likely to achieve dignity, which is a key component of successful democracy. Illiterate voters may be more susceptible to the influences of powerful political figures or groups, making it difficult for them to make truly independent choices. Illiteracy can create a cycle where children of illiterate parents lack the awareness and educational support that educated parents can provide, hindering their ability to become fully informed citizens. Poverty in India does act as a significant impediment to its democracy, creating a paradox where electoral democracy coexists with mass poverty, and hindering true democratic principles by limiting opportunities, fostering political manipulation, and diverting focus from equitable development. This challenges the ideal of democracy by failing to deliver broad economic improvements and sustained human development for all citizens.

Poverty leads to deprivation and inequality in access to opportunities, which is a fundamental threat to democratic principles that demand fair chances for everyone. The poor often lack access to adequate information and education, crucial components for meaningful participation in the democratic process. Politicians may exploit the dire economic circumstances of the poor, using casteism and communalism to garner votes, which undermines the integrity of democratic processes. When democracy fails to deliver sustained economic development and social progress for the poor, it can lead to feelings of disillusionment and a disconnect between the government and the needs of its citizens. The focus on short-term, often populist, responses to poverty can distract from long-term, sustained human development and the creation of a more equitable society. In a context of poverty, wealth and resources often become concentrated in the hands of a few, leading to a political system where the interests of the wealthy and powerful can overshadow the needs of the majority. Under such poverty conditions, a nation cannot be a substantive democratic nation. It is argued that instead of sustained commitment to long-term policies that aim to reduce vulnerability to hunger, the political-administrative response is typically short-term, ad hoc, populist and clientelistic in character.[11]

Regional imbalances in India are widely considered to be a significant impediment to its democracy by creating inequality, regional tensions and a psychological disconnect among citizens, which can undermine the principles of inclusive growth and national unity central to democratic ideals. These disparities manifest as differences in income, education, and access to services, leading to regional pride overriding national concerns and potentially fueling demands for separate states, all of which challenge a unified and democratic political landscape. When certain regions are left behind in development, people may develop psychological impacts and a regional rather than national focus, weakening the sense of collective identity necessary for a functioning democracy. Disparities in economic and social development can lead to resentment, popular agitations and even militant activities, destabilizing the political environment and hindering democratic progress. Gross regional disparities in development have historically led to movements for separate states or regions, demonstrating a fundamental challenge to India's territorial integrity and the inclusive nature of its democracy. Regional imbalances mean that power and resources are not equitably distributed, which can create a sense of neglect in certain areas and undermine democratic principles of fairness and equality. A core aim of Indian democracy is inclusive growth, but if large regions are excluded from the benefits of development, the overall democratic process is undermined and social justice suffers. Backward regions often suffer from political instability, which obstructs investment, causes capital flight, and makes it more difficult for democratic institutions to take root and function effectively. The legacy of British colonial rule created or exacerbated regional disparities, which independent India's planning has not fully rectified. Some regions are naturally better endowed with physical and human resources, giving them advantages that further widen the development gap with less fortunate regions. Rapid growth in some regions and sectors has created pockets of wealth while leaving other areas underdeveloped, a classic problem of cumulative advantage. While planned intervention is necessary, policy decisions can sometimes contribute to the concentration of economic activity and resources, indirectly worsening imbalances. Regionalism often promotes Vote- Bank politics, thereby weakening national integration. Existence and continuation of regional inequalities both among States and within a State create a feeling of neglect, deprivation and discrimination. This situation has led to regionalism manifested in demands for creation of new States, autonomy or more powers to States or even secession from the country. Regionalism is a threat to the development and unity of the nation as it creates internal security challenges by the insurgent groups (Khalistan movement in Punjab), who propagate the feelings of regionalism against the mainstream politico-administrative setup of the country.[12]

Corruption is a significant impediment to democracy in India, as it undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust, and distorts the democratic process by favoring special interests over the public good. Widespread corruption weakens democratic institutions, reduces accountability, and can lead to political instability and social unrest, hindering overall socio-economic development and progress. Corruption weakens the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the principle of the rule of law, which is fundamental to a functioning democracy. Corruption in the political process, including elections and policymaking, can lead to a distortion of representation, where the interests of specific groups or individuals are prioritized over the public good. When citizens perceive high levels of corruption, their trust in the government and democratic processes diminishes, fostering disillusionment and potentially leading to social unrest. Corruption can create a cycle where corrupt practices are perpetuated, making it difficult to hold officials accountable and implement necessary reforms, ultimately weakening democratic checks and balances. Corruption allows special interest groups to gain undue influence, benefiting them at the expense of broader societal welfare and hindering inclusive decision-making processes vital for a democracy. Economically resurgent India faces crisis of governance due to Scams and scandals.[13]

Our democracy faces serious challenges also from casteism, communalism and religious fundamentalism. They weaken the functioning and stability of democratic system. Communal riots are engineered by vested interests for political, religious and economic reasons. Caste violence in various shapes has been increasing. Communal, caste and linguistic tensions are growing in such proportion that the unity of India appears to be threatened .Use of violence in communal and caste politics has given legitimacy to communal violence and crime in politics.[14] Left Wing Extremism was a major issue for India in the past. These organizations are against democratic institutions and use violence to subvert the democratic process at ground level. Criminalization of politics is a significant impediment to democracy in India because it undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust and leads to less effective governance by bringing criminals into the law-making bodies. This phenomenon results in an electoral system that allows individuals with criminal records to win elections and hold

public office, a situation that is often seen to be enabled by lax legislative frameworks and weak enforcement mechanisms. When individuals who break the law become law-makers, it compromises the foundational principles of a democratic society. The involvement of criminals in politics reduces public faith in democratic institutions and the electoral process. Elected officials with criminal backgrounds can obstruct the legislative process, making it harder to enact effective laws and administer the country efficiently. The public prosecution system can become ineffective, and law enforcement and election commissions may struggle to operate independently from political influence. A culture of political patronage can protect accused elected representatives from speedy trials and accountability. Despite recommendations, efforts to effectively reform electoral laws have been insufficient, allowing candidates with criminal records to contest and win elections. Political parties play a crucial role in this problem by failing to implement strict internal procedures. A rule that was meant to be governed by law has rather ended up being a rule of money and muscle power. [15]

Use of communal violence, caste violence and political violence for political gain is dangerous for the existence of our democratic system. Political violence in particular has attained serious proportion.

A potential way to meaningful democracy: In addition to the aforementioned challenges, our democracy faces several other obstacles. How can we eliminate the shortcomings of procedural democracy and establish a substantive democracy? It is accurately stated that substantive democracy seeks to address the limitations of the procedural approach by asserting that social and economic inequalities impede individuals' participation in the democratic process. Substantive democracy advocates for social equality. It emphasizes collective welfare over the interests of a select few within the government. The focus is on social equity. State intervention fosters conditions for political participation by prioritizing the protection of the rights of marginalized groups, including minorities, the deprived, the underprivileged, the socially excluded, the oppressed, neglected individuals, women, and the impoverished, through the principles of distributive justice. Additionally, efforts are made to eradicate inequalities related to caste, class, gender, and so forth, through the proactive measures and affirmative action's of the state to realize true democracy. The initiative of 'Education for All' plays a significant role in reinforcing democracy. Genuine democracy creates an environment conducive to safeguarding individual human rights, fundamental rights, and freedoms, where the expressed will of the populace is exercised freely.

Conclusion: A critical assessment of the working of India's constitutional democracy reveals a system that is robust and resilient but faces significant challenges related to institutional autonomy, civil liberties and the balance of power. General elections demonstrated the people's strong commitment to democratic values, with high voter turnout, including increased participation by women. The process has been viewed as a testament to the resilience of India's democratic institutions. The judiciary is considered a cornerstone of Indian democracy and the "custodian of the Constitution". Through mechanisms like judicial review and Public Interest Litigations (PILs), the Supreme Court and High Courts have expanded the interpretation of fundamental rights (such as the right to life under Article 21 to include a healthy environment and livelihood) and acted as a vital check on executive and legislative overreach. The single, detailed and self-made Constitution, with features like a strong center, separation of powers and fundamental rights, has successfully guided the nation since 1950, accommodating vast pluralities and diversities. Several recent reports and analyses categorize India as a "flawed democracy" and highlight a decline in civil liberties. The rise of a powerful, centralized government has raised questions about executive accountability and challenged India's federal character. There are concerns about increased political interference in constitutional and statutory bodies. The prevalence of dynastic politics and a lack of internal democracy within political parties are seen as issues that concentrate power within small groups and hinder meritocracy. Deep-rooted issues like caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and religious orthodoxy continue to obstruct the equality and fraternity envisioned by the Constitution.

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INDIA'S STRATEGIC SHIFT: CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN FOREIGN POLICY AND DIPLOMACY

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India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation in the 21st century, moving from the traditional doctrine of non-alignment towards a pragmatic strategy of multi-alignment and issue-based partnerships. This paper explores the contemporary trends that define India's strategic shift, focusing on its role in a multipolar world order, deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific, growing emphasis on economic and energy diplomacy, and evolving security partnerships. Special attention is given to India's balancing act between major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, while maintaining leadership in the Global South through climate initiatives and developmental cooperation. The paper also highlights India's increasing reliance on diaspora diplomacy and soft power, alongside challenges posed by regional tensions, great-power rivalries, and global governance reforms. By analyzing recent case studies—ranging from vaccine diplomacy to participation in coalitions like the Quad and BRICS—the study argues that India is steadily transitioning from a balancing power to a leading power with global ambitions.
Keywords: Indian foreign policy, strategic shift, multi-alignment, Indo-Pacific, diplomacy, soft power, diaspora

Introduction: India's foreign policy has witnessed a profound transformation in the early 21st century, evolving from a doctrine of non-alignment to a more pragmatic multi-alignment strategy. This shift reflects India's growing prominence in global affairs, driven by economic progress, military modernization, and an expanding role in international diplomacy. The roots of this shift can be traced back to the post-Cold War era, when India sought to recalibrate its foreign policy to adapt to the changing dynamics of the global order. During this time, India recognized that globalization, along with emerging regional and global challenges, required a departure from the traditional, rigid frameworks of non-alignment. Historically, India's non-alignment policy enabled it to remain neutral in the ideological divide between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. While this approach served India's interests during a particular geopolitical period, the changing landscape in the 21st century, marked by rapid economic growth and technological advancements, necessitated a more dynamic and flexible foreign policy approach. The rise of powerful nations such as China, the emergence of new global players, and the unipolar world order created by U.S. hegemony after the collapse of the Soviet Union further cemented the need for a redefined strategy. India's decision to shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment was driven by the necessity of engaging with multiple powers and regions to maximize its strategic, economic, and diplomatic options. This approach has been increasingly defined by India's need to maintain strategic autonomy while building stronger ties with different global and regional players. In a world where traditional alliances and global order are being challenged, India's multi-alignment strategy ensures that it remains free to engage with various actors across different global platforms, including political, economic, and security spheres, without being subordinate to any one power.

A pivotal moment in this transformation occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities in global systems while highlighting the need for international cooperation. India's response to the pandemic, particularly through vaccine diplomacy, marked a turning point in its foreign policy. The pandemic underscored the importance of global health security, trade diplomacy, and the need for coordinated global efforts to tackle complex challenges. In response, India used health diplomacy to bolster ties with the Global South, playing a leadership role in ensuring that developing countries had access to essential healthcare resources, including vaccines. At the same time, India sought to reinforce its strategic autonomy, demonstrating that it would continue to pursue its independent foreign policy while participating in global initiatives. In the aftermath of the pandemic, India's foreign policy integrated key elements such as maritime security, economic diplomacy, defense cooperation, and soft power to further enhance its global standing. India recognized that it could no longer afford to limit its foreign policy to traditional alignments but had to embrace a multi-aligned approach. This is evident in India's efforts to balance relations with powerful nations such as the United States, China, and Russia, while also playing a leading role in global governance, climate change, counterterrorism, and economic partnerships.

India's diplomatic strategy underlines its role as a global leader, committed to representing the interests of the Global South, championing the cause of climate justice, and pushing for inclusive global governance reforms. The evolving nature of India's foreign policy demonstrates how it is not merely responding to external pressures but actively shaping a new global order that aligns with its strategic, economic, and developmental goals. This paper aims to critically analyze the contemporary trends in India's foreign policy, with a particular focus on its shift toward multi-alignment, the increased role as a global leader, and evolving regional security strategies. The paper seeks to explore how India is strategically leveraging its autonomy to maintain a balance in its relationships with major global players, such as the United States, China, and Russia, while effectively addressing emerging global challenges. It will examine India's approach to regional stability, economic diplomacy, and soft power, which are all integral to its growing influence on the global stage.

India's Emergence as a Global Leader: India's ascent to global leadership in the 21st century is the culmination of strategic efforts that highlight its diplomatic, economic, and security priorities on the global stage. In 2023, India significantly solidified its position as an emerging global power, showcasing its diplomatic acumen and leadership by hosting key global summits. These summits allowed India to present itself as a champion of inclusive growth, climate justice, and global governance reforms, amplifying its voice in international forums and expanding its influence (Siddiqui, 2024)[1].

India's hosting of three major summits in 2023 – the G20 Summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, and the Global South Summit – marked a pivotal moment in its foreign policy strategy. These summits were not just ceremonial events but platforms for India to assert its vision for global cooperation and leadership, particularly in areas like economic governance, climate action, and security cooperation. By hosting these events, India reinforced its role as a key player in shaping the global order in ways that reflect the interests of emerging economies. As the host of the G20 Summit, India took a significant step forward in positioning itself as a leading voice for emerging economies and the Global South. The G20, comprising the world's major economies, provides a platform for discussing global economic challenges, and India's leadership was pivotal in steering the discussions toward inclusive growth (Prabhakar, 2024)[2]. One of India's key priorities was to emphasize the importance of sustainable development and climate change as central to the future of global economic prosperity. India pushed for more equitable distribution of resources, particularly in the context of global health security, following the COVID-19 pandemic. With the world still grappling with the economic and social aftermath of the pandemic, India called for equitable vaccine distribution and global health reforms to ensure that developing nations had access to vaccines and medical support. Furthermore, India's leadership advocated for reforms in global economic governance, focusing on the need to amplify the voices of emerging economies and developing countries in institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These reforms are necessary to create a more inclusive and equitable global economic order that reflects the changing global power dynamics (Larionova and Shelepov, 2022)[3].

India's hosting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in 2023 highlighted its growing role in shaping the security and political discourse in Central Asia and Eurasia. The SCO, which includes key regional players like China, Russia, and several Central Asian nations, provides a platform for addressing regional security challenges, such as terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. India worked tirelessly to enhance counterterrorism cooperation within the SCO framework, emphasizing the need for stronger collective action against transnational threats. India also used the summit to strengthen economic ties with its Central Asian partners, including promoting initiatives for infrastructure development and energy security. While managing its complex relationships with China and Russia, India's participation in the SCO allowed it to showcase its ability to navigate diverse and sometimes competing interests, reinforcing its position as a regional stabilizer and a key security partner. India's bilateral security engagements with Central Asian countries were bolstered, demonstrating its increasing role in the region's security architecture. By advocating for inclusive regional cooperation, India reaffirmed its commitment to peace, stability, and

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economic integration in Eurasia, while also addressing concerns over China's growing influence and Russia's geopolitical ambitions (Dave, 2016)[4].

In 2023, India hosted the Global South Summit, a defining moment in its foreign policy that underscored its leadership role in advocating for the interests of developing nations. The summit was a platform for India to champion fairer trade terms, climate justice, and greater representation of the Global South in international decision-making bodies. India's Global South diplomacy emphasizes solidarity among developing countries in areas such as poverty alleviation, sustainable development, and climate action. During the summit, India called for greater global cooperation in addressing pressing challenges, such as climate change, which disproportionately affect developing countries. India's leadership in this context was clear, as it highlighted the need for financial support and technology transfers to help developing nations mitigate the impacts of climate change. India's position reinforced its commitment to building a more equitable global order where the voices of developing countries are heard, and their concerns are addressed. India's hosting of the Global South Summit also provided an opportunity to enhance its strategic partnerships with countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, ensuring that its diplomatic relationships with these regions remain robust and mutually beneficial. India has consistently positioned itself as a bridge between the Global South and the North, advocating for fairer international trade practices and supporting the reform of international institutions to better reflect the interests of developing nations. India has long viewed itself as a leading representative of the Global South in global forums, and this position has been central to its foreign policy over the past few decades. By leveraging its historical ties with developing nations and its growing economic power, India has consistently used its diplomatic platform to advocate for the rights and interests of countries in the Global South. India has championed issues such as climate justice, global health, and economic equity, making these central pillars of its diplomatic agenda.

India's Leadership in Multilateral Forums: India's increasing participation and leadership in multilateral forums has amplified its voice in shaping global economic, security, and climate policies. Through platforms like the United Nations, BRICS, and G20, India has been able to highlight the issues of developing countries, which have often been overlooked in global decision-making processes. India's leadership has been especially significant in advancing the cause of climate change mitigation and energy transitions. India's leadership in these forums is also reflected in its active role in pushing for reforms in global financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, to make them more inclusive and responsive to the needs of developing countries. This advocacy is aligned with India's larger goal of creating a global governance system that is more equitable and reflective of contemporary geopolitical realities. India's leadership in multilateral forums is not limited to economic matters but extends to security as well. Through active participation in organizations like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), BRICS, and the Quad, India has sought to address global security challenges, including terrorism, regional conflicts, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Promoting Fair Global Governance: India's call for fair global governance is rooted in its desire to create a more inclusive and equitable international system that better reflects the interests of developing nations. India has consistently advocated for the reform of major global institutions like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), World Bank, and IMF, where the current structure is dominated by a handful of Western powers. India has argued that these institutions should be reformed to include greater representation for emerging economies, particularly those in the Global South, to ensure that global decision-making is more representative and fairer. India's multilateral engagements and leadership in pushing for institutional reforms underscore its commitment to promoting a just and equitable global order. India's calls for a reformed UNSC, where developing nations have a stronger voice, and its advocacy for climate justice in international forums highlight its leadership in promoting policies that benefit not only India but the entire Global South. India's strong diplomatic influence in these areas enhances its image as a responsible global leader, committed to upholding the principles of fairness, equity, and justice in the global order.

Navigating Complex Relationships: India's foreign policy has faced significant challenges in recent years, particularly in its dealings with China and the United States. The relationship with China deteriorated sharply in 2020 after the Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in casualties on both sides and heightened military tensions along their shared border. This conflict led to disruptions in trade and diplomatic engagements, with both countries struggling to de-escalate military standoffs. However, by 2025, both nations took steps towards a diplomatic reset, with high-level engagements and renewed trade routes helping to stabilize relations. The agreements on military de-escalation and the reopening of trade channels marked a crucial shift, allowing both India and China to recalibrate their relationship. This reset provided India with an opportunity to pursue a more balanced diplomatic approach, balancing its security concerns with economic cooperation while maintaining its Indo-Pacific strategy to address China's growing regional influence. Simultaneously, India faced a diplomatic and trade crisis with the United States in 2025. The U.S. imposed tariff hikes on Indian textiles and pharmaceutical exports, which severely impacted India's trade surplus and economic growth. Additionally, the U.S. sanctioned India's energy imports from Russia, citing the violation of global sanctions on Moscow. Despite these challenges, India defended its energy diplomacy as crucial to its energy security and economic needs. The tariff dispute and sanctions created a strain in bilateral relations, particularly affecting trade cooperation and defense agreements. India, however, emphasized its commitment to strategic autonomy and reaffirmed its stance of pursuing a multi-alignment policy, ensuring its sovereignty in foreign policy decisions while strengthening partnerships with other global actors.

These tensions with both China and the U.S. underscored India's ability to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics, balancing economic diplomacy, security concerns, and its role in shaping regional and global order. India's strategic approach remains focused on regional stability, economic growth, and maintaining autonomy in a rapidly changing world order. India has increasingly taken a leadership role within the BRICS group, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, representing some of the world's most influential emerging economies. The country has used its position within BRICS to promote collective economic growth, development, and regional stability. As a key member of the group, India has shaped BRICS' economic agenda by advocating for reforms in global economic governance, while fostering closer ties between the five member states in key areas such as trade, investment, infrastructure, and finance.

India's Economic Agenda within BRICS: India's leadership within BRICS has focused on driving economic cooperation and promoting the collective interests of emerging economies. India has leveraged its growing economic clout and strong domestic market to encourage the group to work more collaboratively in areas that are crucial for the economic development of member countries. By pushing for deeper integration and cooperation in trade and investment, India has advocated for reducing barriers to economic exchange and facilitating infrastructure development in BRICS nations. India's strong economic growth, particularly in information technology, services, and manufacturing, has provided the foundation for further economic cooperation among the member states. One of India's main objectives within BRICS has been to increase economic cooperation by facilitating trade partnerships and investment flows among member countries. India has pushed for the reduction of trade barriers within BRICS, encouraging the establishment of more effective financial cooperation mechanisms and enhancing connectivity through projects such as the New Development Bank (NDB), which provides funding for infrastructure projects. India has also championed the idea of greater financial integration, calling for increased coordination in economic policy to tackle global challenges like economic inequality and unfair trade practices that often disadvantage developing countries. Additionally, India has sought to ensure that BRICS members take advantage of opportunities presented by the global digital economy by focusing on digital infrastructure and fintech innovation, areas where India is a recognized leader. Climate change and sustainable development have been central to India's foreign policy, and its leadership within BRICS has reflected these priorities. India has been instrumental in shaping BRICS' stance on climate action, advocating for the adoption of policies that not only promote economic growth but also address the environmental challenges facing developing nations. India has emphasized the importance of balancing economic development with environmental sustainability, particularly in developing countries that are most vulnerable to climate impacts. Through BRICS, India has worked to foster stronger cooperation on renewable energy, energy transitions, and climate-resilient infrastructure. India's strong advocacy for climate justice within BRICS has focused on the need for developed nations to fulfill their obligations under global agreements like the Paris Agreement. India has consistently pushed for fairer climate financing and technology transfer to ensure that developing countries can mitigate climate impacts and adapt to environmental changes (Maslin et al., 2023)[5]. Recognizing that developing economies face disproportionate challenges due to their limited capacity to cope with climate change, India has called for a global climate action plan that considers the economic needs and challenges faced

by emerging economies. India has also led BRICS in promoting clean energy solutions and green finance, encouraging the group to invest in renewable energy sources and sustainable infrastructure projects. In addition, India's leadership on energy transitions within BRICS aims to accelerate the shift towards clean energy technologies, particularly through its advocacy for the International Solar Alliance (ISA). By championing initiatives such as ISA, India has positioned itself as a leader in renewable energy and climate action, advocating for collective efforts to combat climate change while promoting economic development.

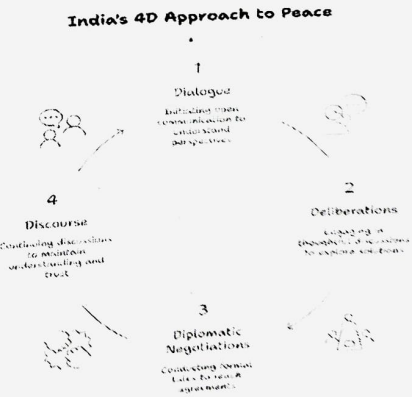
Balancing Relations Between Western and Sino-Russian Interests: India's role in BRICS is uniquely positioned at the intersection of Eastern and Western geopolitics, particularly in managing its relations with China and Russia while maintaining partnerships with Brazil and South Africa. India has masterfully balanced its ties with China and Russia, two countries with which it shares a complex but strategic partnership. While India seeks to enhance cooperation with China in areas such as trade, infrastructure, and technology, it also ensures that it does not compromise on its national security concerns, particularly regarding the China-India border issue. At the same time, India has cultivated a close relationship with Russia in areas like defense cooperation and energy. India's leadership within BRICS has enabled it to manage its relations with both Russia and China while ensuring that BRICS remains a platform where divergent interests can still find common ground. India's ability to navigate these diplomatic complexities demonstrates its strategic agility, allowing it to maintain strong ties with both Western powers and Sino-Russian allies, while also advocating for the Global South and driving the group's agenda forward. India's role as a bridge between different global powers within BRICS has allowed it to push for a balanced approach to international relations, where the interests of both emerging and developed economies are taken into account. This balance is not always easy to achieve, especially given the differing priorities of BRICS members, but India's ability to engage constructively with China and Russia, while also strengthening its ties with Brazil and South Africa, reinforces its leadership within the group. Under the leadership of PM Modi, India's foreign policy has experienced a distinct shift toward a more assertive and independent diplomacy. Also, Jaishankar's tenure as External Affairs Minister has been characterized by his deep understanding of global politics and diplomacy, and he has focused on positioning India as a global leader committed to strategic autonomy and mutual prosperity in its foreign relations. His approach reflects India's evolving role on the world stage, emphasizing the need for a foreign policy that balances engagement with global powers while maintaining India's sovereignty and national interests.

The Concept of 'Vishwabandhu': A cornerstone of Jaishankar's diplomatic philosophy has been the concept of 'Vishwabandhu', or global friend, which underscores India's role as a responsible and respected global player. This idea positions India as a nation that engages diplomatically with others based on principles of mutual respect and shared prosperity. Jaishankar's approach to Vishwabandhu emphasizes that India is committed to fostering partnerships based not on dominance or dependency but on equal standing. His diplomacy centers on the belief that global cooperation should be grounded in respect for each country's sovereignty and mutual benefits. This philosophy has played a key role in India's diplomatic interactions, as it seeks to deepen ties with both developed and developing nations while promoting peace, global stability, and economic cooperation. In 2024, Jaishankar actively promoted India's role as the 'Vishwabandhu' in its diplomacy, emphasizing diplomatic independence and advocating for a foreign policy that is both balanced and inclusive. Under his leadership, India has consistently engaged with multiple global powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and various countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while remaining free from external influence. India's global friendship role has been further exemplified by its leadership in major multilateral forums like the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations, where it has advocated for a more inclusive global governance system. Jaishankar's diplomacy has consistently stressed that India's relationships with other nations must be grounded in respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and the promotion of peace (Thakur, 2024)[6]. This approach has been pivotal in strengthening India's position as a leader in the Global South and in its role as a champion of inclusive diplomacy.

Strategic Autonomy in Foreign Policy: A defining feature of PM Modi's diplomatic vision has been his emphasis on strategic autonomy—the idea that India should have the freedom to make foreign policy decisions based on its national interests, without being forced into rigid alignments with any single global power. PM Modi has consistently reinforced India's commitment to independent decision-making, asserting that India's foreign policy should prioritize national security, economic growth, and sovereignty over external pressures. His approach to strategic autonomy is reflected in India's ability to engage with multiple global powers while maintaining its independent stance in international affairs. The Modi administration has worked to position India as a multi-aligned nation capable of maintaining relationships with a diverse array of global powers, including the U.S., Russia, China, and European nations, without compromising its strategic independence (Quamar, 2024)[7]. India's foreign policy under Jaishankar's leadership is a balancing act that seeks to maximize the nation's benefits from each relationship while avoiding the constraints imposed by permanent alliances. This multi-alignment approach allows India to play a proactive role in global forums such as the Indo-Pacific, BRICS, and the United Nations, where it advocates for reforms in global governance and focuses on economic growth, security, and climate action. By pursuing strategic independence, Jaishankar has ensured that India's foreign policy reflects its growing geopolitical significance and its ability to influence global affairs in a way that aligns with its national interests.

Jaishankar's tenure as External Affairs Minister has significantly reshaped India's global diplomatic strategies, focusing on both bilateral and multilateral engagement. His leadership has reinforced India's growing influence in global affairs, especially in economic diplomacy, regional security, and climate action. Under his guidance, India has strengthened its strategic partnerships with key nations and regional blocs, such as the United States, Japan, ASEAN, and Africa, while also deepening its ties with Russia and China. Jaishankar's diplomatic efforts have also been crucial in addressing regional security concerns, such as tensions in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia, where India has played a central role in promoting peace, stability, and cooperation. Moreover, PM Modi has emphasized India's role as a leader in the Global South, advocating for the concerns of developing nations in global governance forums. His leadership has positioned India as a key proponent of multilateralism and has pushed for reforms in global institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization to better reflect the interests of emerging economies (Verma & Li, 2025)[8]. Jaishankar's diplomatic acumen has solidified India's role as a global leader that values strategic autonomy, global cooperation, and inclusive growth. In conclusion, PM Modi's leadership has been instrumental in shaping India's evolving foreign policy, focusing on maintaining strategic autonomy, promoting India's role as a global friend, and ensuring multilateral diplomacy serves India's national interests. Through multi-alignment, global partnerships, and active participation in international forums, Jaishankar has positioned India as a key player in the global arena, committed to upholding national sovereignty while contributing to global peace and prosperity.

From Dialogue to Discourse: India's 4D Approach to International Peacebuilding: India's 4D approach for peace in international relations—Dialogue, Deliberations, Diplomatic Negotiations, and Discourse—provides a comprehensive framework for fostering peace and stability through diplomatic channels. This approach, which India has effectively employed since 2023, emphasizes a proactive and multifaceted strategy for resolving global conflicts, addressing economic challenges, and promoting international cooperation. Each component of the 4D strategy plays a critical role in ensuring that India maintains its leadership in global diplomacy while safeguarding its national interests.



Source: Napkin AI

Figure 1: India's 4D approach to peace: India has consistently used Dialogue as the first and most essential tool in its foreign policy, especially in its interactions with adversaries and partners alike. Following the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, India and China faced heightened tensions, but India's consistent

emphasis on open channels of communication and dialogue helped facilitate a diplomatic reset in 2025. The high-level meetings between Indian and Chinese leaders in 2025 showcased India's commitment to resolving disputes through peaceful means. India's approach to dialogue was also evident in its engagement with the United States in 2025, despite tensions over trade tariffs and energy imports from Russia. India sought mutual understanding through regular diplomatic talks, reinforcing its commitment to engagement over confrontation. The second aspect of India's 4D approach, Deliberations, is about fostering constructive discussions in multilateral forums. India has used deliberative platforms like the G20, SCO, and BRICS to push for inclusive global governance and collaborative problem-solving. For instance, during the G20 Summit in 2023, India spearheaded discussions on global climate action, health security, and economic reforms, bringing together both developing and developed nations to deliberate on issues of global importance (Mahida and Chauhan, 2023)[9]. These deliberations created common ground on complex global issues, such as global health inequalities and economic recovery post-COVID, helping India position itself as a bridge between the Global South and Global North. Through deliberations, India has been able to advocate for climate justice, fair trade practices, and more equitable economic policies, ensuring that all voices are heard in shaping the future of global governance.

In the realm of Diplomatic Negotiations, India has demonstrated its ability to engage in complex, high-stakes negotiations to secure favorable outcomes for both its own national interests and the global good. This is particularly evident in India's handling of its relations with China and Russia. For example, India's diplomatic negotiations with China in 2025 were pivotal in de-escalating military tensions along the LAC (Line of Actual Control) and agreeing on confidence-building measures to ensure border stability. These negotiations also involved a reopening of trade routes and resumption of economic exchanges, showing how India can balance security concerns with economic imperatives. Similarly, diplomatic negotiations with the U.S. over the tariff hikes in 2025, following the trade dispute, reflected India's ability to maintain strategic autonomy while pursuing economic interests. These negotiations helped manage bilateral tensions, enabling India to strengthen its defense partnerships with the U.S. while protecting its economic sovereignty. Lastly, Discourse in India's 4D approach focuses on promoting peaceful resolutions through public diplomacy, public statements, and international discourse. India's role in the United Nations has been a key example of how it has utilized discourse to promote global peace and security. India's leadership at the UN Security Council has been marked by consistent calls for global cooperation on issues such as climate change, disarmament, and conflict resolution. India has also been vocal about the need for global governance reforms, emphasizing the inclusivity of emerging economies in decision-making bodies. Jaishankar's statements at the UN, such as India's firm stance on climate justice and economic equity, underscore India's commitment to shaping international discourse toward peaceful resolutions and cooperative diplomacy.

Conclusion: India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation in the 21st century, evolving from the era of non-alignment to a more pragmatic and dynamic approach marked by multi-alignment and strategic autonomy. This shift has been particularly evident in the post-COVID-19 world, as the pandemic reshaped global geopolitics and emphasized the importance of global cooperation and health diplomacy. The pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating India's foreign policy adjustments, particularly in its leadership role in global health, economic diplomacy, and regional security. India's swift provision of vaccines to countries in need, through its Vaccine Maitri initiative, highlighted its readiness to play an active role in global humanitarian efforts, further solidifying its status as a responsible global actor. India has positioned itself as a global leader, particularly through its leadership in hosting key summits such as the G20, SCO, and Global South Summit. These events have solidified India's voice for the Global South, advocating for climate justice, inclusive global governance, and sustainable development. India's growing influence is also evident in its leadership within BRICS, where it has successfully advocated for economic cooperation, climate action, and reform of global governance systems. Additionally, its proactive engagement in regional security issues, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, showcases India's expanded role in shaping the future of both global and regional security. A key aspect of India's foreign policy is its commitment to strategic autonomy, which has allowed the nation to manage its relationships with major global powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. India's flexible stance enables it to engage with diverse global players while safeguarding its national interests. The diplomatic reset with China in 2025 and the evolving relationship with the U.S. underscore India's commitment to balancing security concerns with economic imperatives. Modi's leadership has been pivotal in advancing this approach, emphasizing India's role as a 'Vishwabandhu' or global friend, advocating for a foreign policy rooted in mutual respect and shared prosperity. Jaishankar's vision has ensured that India remains a voice of reason and a bridge between the Global South and developed nations, maintaining strong diplomatic ties while remaining committed to its national sovereignty and strategic interests.

One of the defining themes in India's foreign policy today is that "this is not the era of war", a sentiment articulated by PM Modi diplomatic interactions. This belief reflects India's unwavering commitment to peaceful diplomacy and conflict resolution. India's approach emphasizes strategic flexibility and dialogue, exemplified in its handling of regional security challenges such as Operation Sindoor. In this context, India's actions have shown a commitment to addressing conflicts through calibrated diplomatic measures rather than escalation. This approach underscores India's belief in resolving differences through peaceful engagement, avoiding military confrontation, and contributing to global stability. Furthermore, India's strong support for United Nations peacekeeping missions and advocacy for international law reflects its broader diplomatic philosophy of cooperation and dialogue in resolving global challenges. India's performance at the United Nations (UN) also highlights its evolving foreign policy. India has consistently used its position at the UN to advocate for reforms in global governance, particularly in the Security Council, where it has pushed for a more representative structure that reflects the multipolar world of today. Jaishankar's statements at the UN have resonated with the international community, particularly his emphasis on multilateral diplomacy and the need for cooperation to address global issues such as climate change, sustainable development, and global security. Recent statements by Jaishankar at the UN, such as India's firm stance on climate justice and disarmament, underscore India's commitment to global leadership through multilateralism. These efforts have strengthened India's credibility as a global peacekeeper and advocate for inclusive and equitable solutions to global challenges. In conclusion, India's foreign policy has shifted towards a more inclusive, flexible, and assertive approach in response to changing global dynamics, particularly after COVID-19. The country's growing leadership in global forums, its advocacy for climate action, and its focus on economic cooperation have positioned India as a key player in shaping the future of global governance. India's commitment to strategic autonomy, while building strong partnerships with global powers, ensures that it remains a key player in shaping the future global order. As India continues to assert its role as the 'Vishwabandhu', it remains dedicated to promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainability, reflecting its belief that the world's challenges can only be solved through collective, peaceful action and multilateral diplomacy.

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FROM LOOK EAST POLICY TO ACT EAST POLICY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

Mahan Borah

The Look-East Policy was formulated to connect with the Southeast Asian nations proves to be an indispensable proposal to India in the period of foreign exchange crisis of the early 1990s, expanding, protecting and strengthening its interests in the globalized world and particularly in Southeast Asia. After more than thirty years of its first inception, today the policy stands as one of the best-conceived policy by the Indian government. The policy apparently pursued as an economic centric endeavour with the vision to integrate India's crippling economy with the expanding economies of Southeast Asia has expanded in the areas encompassing security, strategic, political, counter-terrorism and defence collaboration. The initiative to include North Eastern Region (NER) in the larger Act East policy seems logical and necessary for the development of the region. However, the questions of visibility of these projects depend on several internal and external factors. In this backdrop, in this paper attempt has been made to look into the transition from Look East Policy to Act East Policy in India and to understand its attributes, to understand the impact (expectations vs reality) of the Look East- Act East policy in the North-eastern region of India.

Key words: Look East, Act East, North-East, Policy, Development

Introduction: India's North-East, a distinctive geopolitical entity comprising the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh is spread over an area of 2.55 lakh sq.km. This accounts for 7 8 percent of the total landmass of India and 3.73 percent of India's vast population. Except the former princely states of Manipur and Tripura, all other states were parts of British colonial Assam. It is to be noted that during the post-colonial period the political map of the North-East transformed very significantly. Nationalism and ethnicity are the two factors which played a very decisive role in the process of transformation of these states in post colonial period. In 2001, Sikkim was included as an eight state to the key policy making institution namely the North East Council. This region is also known for its diversity, which represents multiple ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious identities and competing ethnic aspirations which is distinct from mainland India. This distinctiveness places the North-East in a unique geographical and political space that reflects its ethnic and genealogical connections to the rest of Southeast Asian countries.

The North-East region is connected with the Indian mainland by a 22 km land corridor through Siliguri in the state of West-Bengal, popularly known as Chicken's Neck'. The region shares borders with four Asian countries such as China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Contemporary North-East is witnessing three levels of problems such as i. from within, its own historicity and geographical peculiarity, intra-ethnic conflicts and rebel movements, ii. from the mainstream due to non-recognition of sufficient regional autonomy and adequate political representation at national level and iii. external support to the militant groups of northeast and illegal migration from its neighbourhood especially from Bangladesh, Myanmar and China. These factors have induced a certain degree of instability, political degeneration and have as well contributed to the economic backwardness, retarded infrastructural development and psychological alienation of this region from the mainland India. Thus, the development deficit in the North-East remains a challenge for the government of India. This challenge can be addressed by integrating the North-East with its Southeast Asia region through the policies of Look East and, its renewed version, Act East Policy. India's stable democratic political system, large middle class population, immense military clouts in South Asia, rising economic fortunes and global ambitions make it a potential power that could play a very important role in world affairs.

Objectives:

- To look into the transition from Look East Policy to Act East Policy in India and to understand its attributes.
- To understand the impact of the Look East- Act East policies in the North-eastern region of India

Discussion: The Look East Policy (LEP), a part of India's extended neighbourhood policy was initiated by the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in an address in Singapore in 1994 and has been followed by the successive governments of India. The intensification of the economic linkages with the ASEAN in the first phase was led by the Rao government and later the second phase was led by the NDA government under the leadership of A. B. Vajpayee. Under the leadership of Dr.Manmohan Singh, the LEP has been re-energised with a renewed focus on the role of Northeast in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. India's LEP is a major foreign policy shift, in fact, a 'paradigm shift', which has brought changes in India's orientation towards China and Southeast Asia. In the pre 1990s India's foreign policy has been Pakistan centric in particular and subcontinental specific in general. But with the LEP, India has decided to come out of the 'sub-continental cold war situation and take up a proactive role in the region." Closer ties with Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries are needed to check rising China and to contain conflict in its northeastern region. These political objectives are conjunctively supplemented by the economic imperatives of integration with ASEAN economy vis-à-vis the interest of global economy. In the post cold war era the ASEAN countries realise that India is an emerging player who can play a very important role in shaping the future political and security environment of Asia. They see India's competitive strength in democratic institution, resilience and stability of India's political institutions and the potentials to sustain high economic growth rates as an emerging economic power. In the meantime, Prime Minister Rao in 1991 through his initiative for economic liberalisation opened up new vistas for regional integration with the global economy with special emphasis on economic diplomacy. To quote K Indrakumar, " with the collapse of bi-polarity, India's role as a leader of Third World countries diminishes and a kind of inferiority complex emerged in India's ruling circle vis-à-vis Southeast Asia and East Asian economic development. For many decades, India thought it was far ahead of all the countries of Southeast Asia but the superior performance of 'ASEAN Tigers' (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia) came as a rude shock to India, inflicting great damage to its image and international status. With the liberalisation and privatisation of its economy, India seems determined to emulate the 'ASEAN Tigers' model. It is pertinent to mention that India's Look East policy is not a coincidental phenomenon but a logical outcome of neo-liberal economic reforms." As a result, India formally shaped the Look East Policy to foster closer economic ties with its South and Southeast Asian neighbours with emphasis on renewing political and economic contacts with the ASEAN members. This policy has led to making India a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a Full Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1995, member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. In November 2002, the first ASEAN-India summit was held in Combodia to mark a major milestone in integrating India in Southeast Asia. The fifth ASEAN-India summit was held in Phillipines in 2007 resolved to implement free trade agreement and is considered a significant breakthrough for the Look East Policy. It is to be noted that India's perception of the 'East' in the phrase of Look East policy is not confined within ASEAN countries. The ultimate goal is to have a strong hold in the Asia-Pacific region. This region is vital to India's economic and political security because of its geo-political and geo-economic implications.

In accordance with its new policy of making the Look East Policy more relevant for the Northeast India there has been initiation of some infrastructural projects and India has also joined in some multilateral initiatives that provide the opportunity to develop infrastructure linkages between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Better connectivity of Northeast India with Southeast Asia can transform the region into an attractive economic zone of the world. The decision of the central government to link up the region with Southeast Asia through proposed Asian Highway and Trilateral Highway project involving India, Thailand and Myanmar, proves the point that the government has finally decided to take locational advantage of Northeast India. The proposed Asian Highways would pass through the Northeastern states of Assam and Manipur connecting Thailand via Myanmar. It would pass through Moreh in India, Tamu and Bagan in Myanmar before reaching Maesot in Thailand. It is to be noted that the Northeastern states of India have been demanding for long the reopening of Stilwell road for connecting Ledo in Assam to kumning in China's Yunan province via Myitkyina in Myanmar. The reopening of this road could transform the economy of Northeast India by reducing time, cost and distance involved in trade with China and Southeast Asia. China has shown its interest to reopen the Stilwell road by developing its part of the road and linked it with its Highway network. But India has been reluctant about the reopening of the Stilwell road due to insurgency problems and the fear of increase of Chinese influence in its Northeastern region. However, due to the normalisation in India- China relations and pressure from the Northeastern states, India has shown interest in opening of the Stilwell road. Thus, in future the Stilwell road would reemerged as another link between India's Northeast with Southeast

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Asia including China. Facilitation of these projects entails the sponsorship of the World Bank as plans for the 1360 km trans Asian highways to link India, Myanmar and Thailand in the first phase and with India-China in the second phase. This trans Asian highways will, in due course of time, be part of a much larger trans-Eurasian highway linking South Asia, Southeast Asia, China and Europe. Along with better road connectivity the Indian government has emphasized importance on better rail, air and telecommunication connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia countries.

Transition from Look East to Act East: During her visit in India, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed that Washington encourages New Delhi not just to "look" East but to engage East and "act" East. This US push to India to act on the Indo-Pacific region was reaffirmed in August 2014 when India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj announced that the decades-long "Look East Policy" would become "Act East Policy". It was forwarded by the speech of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 4th East Asia Summit and 12th India-ASEAN Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. He formally asserted that India had turned the "Look East Policy" into "Act East Policy". Though New Delhi has not clearly outlined the key features, content, and scope of the policy initiative, Act East Policy is not only the continuation of the Look East Policy but also represents a transformation in India's foreign policy towards eastern world. As part of its Act East Policy, India is helping Southeast Asian countries to build up strategic infrastructures and capacities. Whether Beijing likes it or not, India has emerged as one of the main players in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. However, there remains a question whether something substantial has or has not changed by the renaming of the Look East Policy to Act East Policy? This question concerns all the policymakers and scholars of the North East States. Critics also argued that these phases are deeply rooted in the domestic political rhetoric rather than tectonic foreign policy shifts as the BJP Government under the leadership of Prime Minister NarendraModi has sought to differentiate their foreign policy formulation from its predecessor, Congress. From the very beginning, the Government of India did not declare explicitly the objectives of this policy. From time to time, scholars and thinkers who are dealing in this field implicitly or explicitly explain the main agendas of this policy. With the transition from Look East to Act East Policy, the major differences between the two of India need mention.Look East Policy was launched in 1991 and its main focus was boosting economic cooperation. Its relationship (bilateral and multilateral) was mainly ASEAN and its member countries. North East India was present only verbally but almost absent in its plan of forging deeper ties with Southeast Asia. It almost did not cover maritime security.The Act East Policy, on the other hand, is an upgraded version of Look East Policy and initiated in 2014.It encompasses economic cooperation, political, security, cultural and capacity building infrastructures.It extends India's relations upto with East and Southeast Asian countries and even Australia.In this policy, the Government of India acknowledges the North Eastern Region as a 'gateway' of this policy. It covers maritime security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region.

Look East- Act East Policy and its implications for Northeast India: One of the important visions that came through the Look East and Act East Policy was its aim to integrate the North East Region into the larger economic enclave of Southeast Asia. In its second phase of the policy, the North East Region gained importance as a corridor of opportunity and India embarked on an effort to improve the region within itself, with mainland India and Southeast Asia. India began to explore its potential in economic cooperation and integration with Southeast Asian countries. In all, most of the India-ASEAN trade relations mainly centers on the sea routes along the coastal belts of India. As such the amount of interaction between the nations was at minimal. Indeed, there was a lack of realization on the Indian part to emphasize the importance of NER as a physical route despite the region's proximity to Southeast Asia. There could be many answers to this juggling question as to why NER was not taken into consideration inenhancing its relations with Southeast Asia at first instance. It is true that NER turns out simply being a transmission belt connecting India and ASEAN, where Myanmar (who shares 1640 km long border) provides a key link in establishing a chain of connectivity with the rest of Southeast Asia. However, prior to 1997 when Myanmar became a fully ASEAN member, it closed its interaction to the outside world.

Therefore, it was the strategic consideration in realizing the importance of Myanmar in enhancing India-Southeast Asia connection that strategy was made to bring the NER and Myanmar at the core of its policy planning. In this regard, India and Myanmar signed the Border Trade Agreement in 1994 and eliminated the bottleneck of connectivity issue. The agreement provided for the opening of check posts along the India-Myanmar border at Moreh in Manipur (India) and Tamu in Sagaing (Myanmar) and Champai in Mizoram (India) and Rhi in Chin (Myanmar). With the opening of the border posts, India- Myanmar registered a progressive flow in the formal trade and secured a connectivity relation thus obtaining its strategy of bringing NER and Myanmar into its Look East policy. Furthermore, with this opening, four other check posts (Pangsau, Paletwa, Lunguwas-Yanyong, and Pangnyo) were also opened along the India-Myanmar border. After Myanmar became a full ASEAN member in 1997 further steps were taken to use the possible strategy to map the North Eastern Region (NER) into connectivity and development projects. In this regard, various projects were drawn up by India and ASEAN to integrate the region and make it a powerful economic block to reckon with. Significant opportunities which this policy would provide, according to Singh, 2021, for the sustainable development of the North Eastern Region ofIndia are as under:

Connectivity: This landlocked region is opening day by day with the rest of the country. Many international Organisations like World Bank, New Investment Bank give soft loan for physical infrastructures. Foreign countries like Japan through Japan Infrastructure Cooperation Agency (JICA) invest huge money for road constructions in Mizoram, Assam etc. The construction of Asian Highways would provide large business investment. The organised and unorganised sector can export their goods to the neighbouring countries. It will increase the economic activities of the region. Also, the projects which are underway namely the Trilateral Highway Proposal to link NER of India to Myanmar and Bangladesh; the BCIM Economic Corridor to connect Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar to South and Southeast Asia; the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project to combine the land, river and sea route to link Kolkata, Northeast Region, and Myanmar; Asian Highway I and II to improve highway system in Asia. All these projects have reflected the strategic significance of NER in India's Act East Policy. **Untapped resources:** This region is a world's biodiversity hotspot region. So, it has multiple natural scenic beauties which will attract tourists. North East people are known for their hospitality. This area has an edge of the region. There are a lot of natural resources like oil and gas, coal, hydropower etc. If these resources utilise in a sustainable manner, lot of jobs willgenerate thereby will reduce the unemployment rate among the educated youths. This will in great length reduce the anti-national activities in the region.

Human Resources: As the literacy rate is high and maximum of the youth are English educated, with the coming of adequate infrastructure, youth of this region automatically will generate jobs. India can promote the Atmanirbhar Bharat idea among them.The outflow of people from this region could be minimised in large number. This would reduce the sponsor economy model which has been following in the last many decades. Thus, these states can regenerate a self-sustain economy which is not entirely depending upon the Centre government's fund like the present situation. **Cultural connections:** Since ancient time, Indian value system and culture has spread in Southeast Asia. This cultural connection brings closure mainly with Southern India. During the British time, Indian Diasporas were settled in Myanmar and Bangladesh and Nepalese also settled in India. We have Manipuri communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It strengthens ties with these countries significantly.

Opportunity to strengthen: This policy gives a golden chance to strengthen India's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region'scountries. India has multiple bilateral relations with these countries for instance, India-Japan Act East Forum initiative in 2017 and India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement in 2005. India is a founding member of East Asia Summit which was established in 2005. With all these, India is able to extend its geo-strategic position upto the South China Sea. All these opportunities can be achieved only through the NER of India as it stands as the gateway to India's physical interaction with the South, Southeast and East Asian countries, Although there are a lot of opportunities that this policy can offer NER, there are also several constraints while executing Act East Policy that come in the path of its development. First, lack of infrastructure development of the region makes it very difficult for the region to be connected to mainland India. Second, security concerns prevail in the NER and it is the only region where security concerns dominate economy. The security forces and the counter terror tactics in the North East Region have remained pitted against these challenges posed by the armed groups. As such the idea of bringing the NER at the core of Look East policy based on developing the region has been marred by the security issue. Also, the policy to rechristen the Look East into Act East is mired by the growing role of China in the Asia-Pacific regions with its soft power backed by development and economic incentives like One Belt One Road, Asian Development Bank etc. In addition, many Indian policymakers assert that the rise in armed militants in the NER is made possible by the continuous support that China is providing to the militants. As such, it is the projection of greater

rivalry between India and China that objectifies the Look East policy-Act East policy than the development and connectivity initiatives.

Conclusion: The Look-East- Act-East policy- formulated to connect with the Southeast Asian nations proves to be an indispensable proposal to India in the period of foreign exchange crisis of the early 1990s, expanding, protecting and strengthening its interests in the globalized world and particularly in Southeast Asia. After more than twenty years of its first inception, today the policy stands as one of the best-conceived policy by the Indian government. The policy apparently pursued as an economic centric endeavor with the vision to integrate India's crippling economy with the expanding economies of Southeast Asia has expanded in the areas encompassing security, strategic, political, counter-terrorism and defense collaboration. It has enlarged its relation not only to the ASEAN but to the Far East countries, including Japan, Australia, and South Korea. This illustrates the growth that the policy has achieved in its endeavor and also in establishing as an alternative power to China in Southeast Asia and AsiaPacific. The essence of incorporating NER in the second phase of its policy by bringing development and connectivity projects is also a significant step to the conflict-ridden region. It was projected that the initiative might contribute and address its major problems of underdevelopment.

The initiative to include NER in the larger Act East policy seems logical and necessary for the development of the region. However, the questions of visibility of these projects depend on several internal and external factors. As such, in the essence of Look East-act east policy, bringing NER was one of its ultimate aims. In this regard, the policy needs to be hastened in such a way that the economic prosperity of the region becomes noticeable. There should be a proper monitoring mechanism to tackle the challenges, including the social, cultural and political problems. The policy should be practical in addressing the real stake of the people of the region in availing all the proposed benefits. With the possession of such consideration, the policy can meet its potentials and strengthen its relations with Southeast Asia and also bring prosperity to the North East Region.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SUMMIT DIPLOMACY IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY SINCE 2014

Nagalaxmi Raman

With summit diplomacy emerging as a critical instrument, India's foreign policy has experienced a significant shift in its overseas connections and strategic stance. High-level meetings between heads of state and government serve as a symbol of this policy, which India has used to further its economic interests, deepen bilateral and multilateral ties, and collaborate with other nations to address global issues. India has actively engaged with key countries, adjacent areas, and international institutions through summit diplomacy, increasing its influence and capacity for negotiation on the global stage. This diplomatic approach, reflecting India's evolving aspirations to become a significant player on the global arena, has made the country's pursuit of economic progress, strategic autonomy, and regional stability easier. In evaluating summit diplomacy's contribution to India's foreign policy objectives, the abstract highlights the tactic's significance in handling geopolitical challenges and promoting sustainable development.

Keywords: Summit Diplomacy, India's Foreign Policy, Development, Economic Interest.

Introduction: Summit diplomacy is the agreement between the parties to convene and discuss a matter at a designated location. Instead of being focused on regular discretionary items, the effort is usually centered around a specific topic (settlement, exchange accord, etc.) that all parties must agree to. Usually, there is a set time limit and a formal incentive, which are all meant to help participants focus on moving closer to the goal. In addition, India has significant influence in other global institutions including the IBSA Dialog Forum, the World Trade Organization, the East Asia Summit, the G8, and the International Monetary Fund. India is a participant in both the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Shanghai. India is a member of BIMSTEC and SAARC on a local level. India has participated in a number of UN peacekeeping operations and was the UN's second-largest troop backer in 2007. Along with the other G4 countries, India is currently seeking a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The Modi administration's disengaged strategy pertains to the arrangements that the government established with several states upon his ascension to the Indian prime minister ship on May 26, 2014. The task of implementing India's distant strategy fell to the Ministry of External Affairs, which is led by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. Modi's remote arrangement was focused on strengthening ties with South Asian neighbors, attracting the inclusive neighborhood in Southeast Asia and the main international powers. In pursuit of this, he had traveled with the support of the US, Myanmar, Australia, and Fiji on official visits to Bhutan, Nepal, and Japan during the first 100 days of his presidency. Moreover, Madam Swaraj has traveled to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and other places as an official. India's Foreign Policy is Determined by Basic Geo-Strategic Locations. Geology incorporates areas, estimate, geography, state limits, populace, atmosphere, and hydro-graphy. Every one of these components are vital in fluctuating degrees legislative issues and remote approach. The historical backdrop of worldwide relations demonstrates that area has dependably been an essential determinant of outside strategy. In expressions of all out mechanical creation India involves the ninth position on the planet. Her innovative labor is third biggest on the planet, beside USA and China. Following freedom, India attempted to avoid Cold war governmental issues to focus on its monetary advancement with a communist structure in arrangement making. India's promise to world harmony, hostile to pioneer battle, resistance to prejudice, duty to vote based system, secularism and serene concurrence and so forth are sure philosophical qualities that developed amid the opportunity development. Our relationship has come a long way during a time of external pressure and resistance from a distant power. The way a government handles international relations is directly influenced by its kind. Being the largest vote-based system in the world, it allows for a certain amount of outside agreement making. India, as the just country, is accountable to the parliament for all affairs and to the people at large. Commonly important problems are discussed in the media and among ideological groupings.

The development of International law and association, sway on global relations as well as, many time seek after states to secure national enthusiasm at any expense. Before the finish outside strategy was to a great extent quality . They both of the power coalitions enjoyed collusion making like, NATO, SEATO, Warsaw agreement and Baghdad settlement. The appearance of worldwide liberal wonder and the rise of innovatively hello speed environment have made the world as ‹worldwide town›. The complex and between blended nature of world has direct effect on remote approach creation of each state. In such condition, India has received a remote arrangement with more noteworthy down to earth way. Be that as it may, the outside strategy of India accentuate on against government dependence on the ethos of United Nations (UN) and the deep rooted standards of harmony and secularism. Anti-dominion or expansionism as a part of Indian remote arrangement created out of India›s own understanding under British colonialism. In first position it was anything but a universal thought. Nonetheless, after the First World War the Indian chiefs began contradicting colonialism all over the place. They set apart out the money related weights as well as their opportunity to settle on choice as free country. To the pioneers government was fundamental precondition for the opportunity and uniformity of countries and world peace. The term ‹Non-Alignment› itself was begat by Indian Prime Minister Nehru amid his discourse in 1954 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In this discourse, Nehru portrayed the five columns to be utilized as a guide for Sino-Indian connection, who were first advanced by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai called Panchasheel[1]

India guarantees to have serene conjunction, independence, co-activity, non-arrangement, support for decolonisation, demobilization, expulsion of imbalances among the countries and worldwide battle against politically-sanctioned racial segregation and racialism. The fundamental goal of the approach is to protect India's opportunity of alternatives and basic leadership in a world loaded with competition among incredible countries for matchless quality and strength. India had encountered most noticeably awful encounters of outside principle and dominion, the nation has constantly bolstered the reason for opportunity and battle against segregation, regardless of whether racial, monetary or political. India stretched out its full help to Indonesia in its battle for autonomy. During the 1950s, amid the Korean emergency, India gruffly would not favor one side and stayed nonpartisan while requiring a quiet arrangement. Correspondingly, in 1956, when the Suez Canal emergency undermined world-harmony in the wake of British-French-Israel animosity on Egypt, India assumed a useful job by denouncing the assault and asked its prompt end. India's commitment to keep up harmony and stay away from clashes can likewise be found in its full help to the U.N. in its peacekeeping measures. Indian representatives and military staff have been taking part on the planet body's peacekeeping activities in different beset portions of the world like Congo, Lebanon, Cyprus, Yugoslavia, Cambodia, and Somalia, and so forth.

India has also played a significant role in transforming the British Commonwealth into the modern Commonwealth. Among the part nations, India dependably argued the instance of South African individuals and assumed a key job for energizing feeling against politically-sanctioned racial segregation and the minority white routine, which has since been casted a ballot out of intensity. Additionally, India's job as a main individual from the Non-Aligned Movement has been exceptionally positive and useful on significant worldwide issues. Following the peace between the two superpowers, India has acknowledged the purported end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, in the meanwhile, it is aware of their minimal dedication to global demobilization and has chosen not to ratify the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. India has restricted the NPT in light of the fact that it is prejudicial and against the interests of creating countries. India needs the superpowers of the world to quit delivering atomic weapons as well as devastate the current ones. Further, China ought to likewise be conveyed to the arranging table and there ought to be huge decrease in the protection spending plans of the five changeless individuals from the Security Council. India is against separation in any structure. India likewise demands that, rather than reciprocal arrangements, all demilitarization exchanges ought to be held under the sponsorship of the U.N. to make them straightforward, reasonable, all inclusive and non-oppressive. India's esteem has been ever on the expansion on account of its free remote strategy dependent on non-arrangement. India has confidence in settlement of the considerable number of issues by serene methods, over the table and through talks and arrangements. India needs to keep up quiet and benevolent relations with Pakistan and settle every single serious issue, including that of Kashmir, through talks and dealings as indicated by the Shimla Agreement. India needs quiet and neighborly relations with Pakistan notwithstanding the last's pugnacious disposition, forceful stances and backing to psychological oppressor exercises in

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Jammu and Kashmir. India solidly has faith in co-activity, the guideline of 'when in doubt refrain from interfering', and standardization of relations among every one of the countries of the world[2].

India wants to restrict the use of nuclear energy to peaceful uses. Furthermore, it has been living out what it has preached. As long as the non-proliferation treaty is impartial and nonpartisan, India is in favor of it as well. India has worked particularly hard to strengthen its ties with its neighbors. As a result, India has friendly, constructive, and healthy relations with China, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and other countries today. Numerous visits have taken place, and agreements and treaties have been made for the advancement of the industrial sector, cultural exchanges, and economic development. India's foreign policy has, for the most part, been successful in maintaining its reputation as a non-aligned, peace-loving, rising nation committed to global wealth and peace.

From the most punctual pattern India rises its strategy making and the range of summit diplomacy. From the present summit discretion it likewise conveys to another range. At the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's effort to different world pioneers flagged how practicality has turned into a key driver of Indian remote arrangement conduct. India's financial ascent and its capacity to oversee various and on occasion even conflicting worldwide connections has given New Delhi newly discovered influence in its political commitment. What's more, Modi isn't timid in utilizing that leverage. At a more extensive dimension, New Delhi figured out how to pull off two apparently conflicting trilaterals. Modi met with United States President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to underscore India's solid responsibility to make the Indo-Pacific a locale for shared monetary development, flourishing, and security. Affirming that India will "keep on cooperating on shared qualities," Modi stated, "When you take a gander at the abbreviation of our three nations — Japan, America, and India — it is 'JAI', which represents accomplishment in Hindi." Abe trusted that the trilateral would fortify the trilateral association and its nearby participation "towards understanding a free and open Indo-Pacific. "Trump likewise recognized that the connections between our three nations is incredibly great and amazingly solid with India, possibly more grounded than any time in recent memory. We are doing together. We are completing a ton of exchange together. We are completing a great deal of barrier together, a ton of military buys." The three countries shared their perspectives on advancing a free, open, definitive and rule-based request in the Indo-Pacific area, in light of regard for worldwide law and serene goals everything being equal[3].

The Indo-Pacific develop is currently at the focal point of vital moving in the locale and the three countries have been endeavoring to characterize the careful extent of their commitment. Modi had clarified India's remain on the vital Indo-Pacific locale in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialog in Singapore in June. "India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a system or as a club of constrained individuals. Nor as a gathering that tries to rule. Also, in no way, shape or form do we think about it as coordinated against any nation. A land definition, all things considered, can't be," he had said. The trilateral in Argentina reinforced the desire of the three governments to promote the Indo-Pacific, but at its core lies China's rapid rise and the challenge it poses to geopolitical security. Although China is the leading force behind JAI, India's efforts are typically motivated by the Trump organization's test of the global financial request. The fact that New Delhi managed to pull this off is a credit to Modi's keen interest in managing important power dynamics over the past few years. In this era of fluid alliances, Indian diplomacy must be skillful to preserve Indian interests. Modi's commitment at the G-20 underline that New Delhi is fit for dealing with this ease[4]

India's key commitment in outside tact are supported towards another range looking at from the earlier years. It was additionally globalized toward an uplifting disposition getting another changing situation the general public and the job of India's strategy and system are likewise broadly known in the worldwide arrangement. A portion of Geology incorporates areas, estimate, geography, state limits, populace, climate, etc. It components are critical in differing degrees for Indian national governmental issues and remote strategy. The historical backdrop of universal relations demonstrates that area has dependably been an essential determinant of outside arrangement of a state. Britain's strategic location has enabled her to exert influence over the waves in terms of trade and naval might. The United States' geographic location has historically aided her in pursuing noninterventionist foreign policy. The region has contributed to her becoming one of the world's leading shipbuilding and trading nations. Specifically, its areas, size, and three state boundaries are crucial in constructing our distant strategy. Notwithstanding remarkable political effort, India has yet to emerge victorious in terms of gaining a defined and widely recognized frontier with Pakistan or China. India's strategic region now provides a focal point for Asia and the world. As indicated by Nehru, India is somewhat connect between the East and West, and turns out to be unavoidably associated with major worldwide issues. That is the principle motivation the superpowers USA and USSR have kept key connection. It shows a key job in numerous Cold war issues, non-arrangement development and north-south clash, indispensable to our outer political and monetary relations and national presence. In old and medieval occasions the Indian Ocean saw an immense business traffic among India and Arab nations. It was referred to as "English Lake" during the British decision-making era. Our whole external and coastal trade depended on the Indian Ocean once we gained independence. Our monetary advancement is along these lines, intensely dependent on this sea. It offers these least demanding and best methods for correspondence among India and the greater part of neighboring countries. India is very fit for guarding her property frontiers. To wrap things up, India has an exceptional position among the nations of the world, as it is the biggest popular government, the nation in zone[5]. In the world rankings for total mechanical generation, India is ranked ninth. Her creative output ranks third globally, after only. India tried to steer clear of Cold War-era legislation after gaining independence in order to concentrate on developing its economy using a communist system of agreement-making. India recognized the necessity to establish broad-based, globally-minded relationships in order to accelerate financial progress.

Indian Tradition- India's duty to world harmony, hostile to pioneer battle, restriction to bigotry, responsibility to majority rule government, secularism and quiet conjunction and so on are sure philosophical qualities that risen amid the opportunity development. India's global ties have come a long way since the British colonial era, when a distant power hampered connections from the outside. Few Indians had any experience creating or managing remote arrangements in 1947, when autonomy was granted. Jawaharlal Nehru explained India's way to deal with the world. Indian remote approach is as yet dictated by its well established strategy of Panchsheel. It is the most vital standard of India's outside arrangement to conjunction and collaboration among neighboring countries. Like different highlights it is additionally the result of contemporary world circumstance and India's national advantages. As the option of concurrence is co-obliteration, such an approach turns into even more applicable. The standard of "Indian remote approach and contemporary security challenges."

Political Organizations: The way a government handles international relations is significantly influenced by its political system and form of governance. Being the most populous government in the world, it allows for a certain amount of openness while negotiating remote arrangements. India is a majority rule country with parliamentary government, meaning that all strategy decisions are accountable to the parliament and the broader public. Important global topics are constantly discussed in the media and within ideological groups. For example, the current negotiations over US-Indian civilian nuclear deals are also openly addressed among civil society, educated individuals, and restriction pioneers. Governments that make decisions invite the viewpoints that knowledgeable people and research groups have to provide on various problems. The approach of worldwide liberal wonder and the development of innovatively hello there speed environment have made the world as 'worldwide town'.nature of world has direct effect on outside approach creation of each state. In such condition, India has embraced an outside strategy with more noteworthy sober minded way. In any case, the outside arrangement of India underscore on hostile to colonialism, the Non-Alignment Movement atomic nonproliferation, dependence on the ethos of United Nations and the deep rooted standards of others area.

India was one of the establishing individuals from UN toward the second's end War. India follows totally and completely to the standards and the motivations behind th. The commitment to the world harmony has sufficient energy to time by its commitment to different harmony keeping missions. In any case, India's job in demilitarization and regard for human right likewise Real tourist spots of exercises are many. India essentially played a non-aggressive, yet compelling job in Korea. It sent a medicinal brigade as a major aspect of United Nations powers amid the Korean War. India's political noteworthiness as an unprejudiced and firm backer of harmony, and as a non-member exposed to the harsh elements War was extremely high So, Indian military were welcome to frame the significant component of United Nations harmony keeping task, and other clashing district in. India in additionally contributed harmony keeping powers t, Angola, Sudan and The expert fitness and fair-mindedness of Indian administrators were recognized by the with a portiopicked by the United Nations' Sec to order the UN peacekeeping powers at various purposes of time.

India's profound enthusiasm for the aggregate success of creating countries brought about its driving job to build up and the Economic and Social Council and many particular offices of the Ihas constantly attempted to overcome any issues between monetarily, in fact productive north alliance with poor, less effective south bloc. India is likewise a main nation which advances n, and mass annihilation .After the finish of Cold War, the change proposition for United Nations Security Council came to beginning. In any case, India neglected to concoct any solid proposition diagrams. The serious issue was that the present individuals fromwere from They have their veto control which assumes conclusive job in basic leadership process.is the main Asian nation, in this way, develoof enrollment may bring new countries who are assuming huge job in world legislative. India needs to build up an equivalent, multipolar world not quite the same as the present one.

India's influential role of diplomacy comparing from the previous and current policy.

Narendra Modi made the vow of office as India's fourteenth PM. Among his first choices as head of government – truth be told, it was gotten under way even before the formal beginning of his residency – was a capricious demonstration of strategy: welcoming eight remote pioneers of neighboring nations to go to his introduction. While numerous pundits asserted before his race would be a patriot hardliner, a remote undertakings fledgling, or basically business as usual on outside issues, the head administrator rather demonstrated increasingly dynamic and more even minded than many had anticipated. In two years, he has shown an instinctual comprehension of intensity in the lead of Worland he has additionally profited by being less politically hamstrung than his ancestor, with whose perspective he in reality shares much in like manner. A feetfirst year was his effort to the United. In September 2014, Washington presented a royal welcome for a pioneer it had once freely evaded, and Modi responded by welcoming to, a first for a U.S. president. Be that as it may, past normalizing and improving relations with the US, Modi's global needs were rapidly made clear. Inside his first year, he set out upon state visits to India's prompt neighborhood, three Ur island nations, critical Asia and in the long run.

Regardless of this whirlwind of movement, a few reporters have been left disillusioned by Modi's and India's treatment of global relations. My Brookings India partner W.P.S. Sidhu has indicated an absence of vital vision, and portrays Modi's different remote arrangement activities for example, Neighborhood First and Act East as "vacuous." While complimenting the head administrator's sound impulses, activity, and vitality, previous outside secretary Shyam Saran has regretted the absence of a general national security methodology and reprimanded the need conceded dramatic skill over substance. In the interim, Rajesh Rajagopalan of Jawaharlal Nehru University has communicated dissatisfaction with the absence of new thoughts and cooperative energy and his partner Happymon Jacob has blamed New Delhi's tormenting and poor creative ability for terrible relations with its neighbors. Quite a bit of this analysis is bewildering. Equivocalness and deniability have an incentive in remote issues. As an outcome, neither this Indian government nor any of its antecedents have ever expressly illuminated their vital aims in a solitary archive, in spite of the fact that there are bounty of public statements that offer a decent sign of the administration's viewpoint. These open verbalizations, joined with the nature, results, and timings of Modi's conciliatory exercises, offer an unmistakable image of India's needs and key destinations. They are basically five-crease:

Organizing a coordinated neighborhood; "Neighborhood First. Utilizing global associations to advance India's local improvement. Guaranteeing a stable and multipolar parity of intensity in the Indo-Pacific; "Act East." Deterring Pakistan from supporting fear mongering. Propelling Indian portrayal and authority on issues of worldwide administration. These are the measuring sticks against which the global exercises of this legislature or, so far as that is concerned, any Indian government ought to be estimated.

Neighborhood First: Improving network, alleviating patriotism: The Indian government has accepted a technique known as "Neighborhood First," which aims to illustrate four points. The first is New Delhi's inclination to delegate political authority and decision-making power to its immediate neighbors and the island governments of the Indian Ocean. The second is to provide neighbors with resources, hardware, and preparation as needed. The third—and possibly most important—is more availability and combination to enhance the free flow of goods, people, energy, money, and information. The fourth is to promote an India-driven regionalism model that its neighbors can live with. The newly discovered discretionary need on the district is obvious in Modi's visits to the majority of India's neighbors – notwithstanding The Maldives – just as standard authority gatherings in India and on the sidelines of multilateral summits. India has additionally turned out to be all the more imminent in offering help and in limit building, in the case of finishing up its greatest ever barrier deal to Mauritius, or in giving philanthropic help to Nepal or Sri Lanka. With Bangladesh, the finish of the Land Boundary Agreement, upgrades in vitality availability, and steps taken towards getting to the port of Chittagong have all been essential advancements that assistance to set a positive tone for a district since quite a while ago characterized by cross-fringe doubt and hostility. India's emphasis on network is additionally step by step broadening outward, regardless of whether to Chabahar in Iran or Kaladan in Myanmar. Despite the fact that India will keep putting resources into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation as an institutional vehicle, it has additionally communicated an eagerness to create issue-explicit groupings that are not held prisoner to agreement: a "SAARC less X" approach. Two instances of this are the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal gathering – intended to propel engine vehicle development, water control the board, and between matrix network – and the basic SAARC Satellite, which India has chosen to continue with in spite of Pakistan's objections. These coordinated endeavors have so far had blended outcomes. Bangladesh and Bhutan have plainly been certain accounts for India. Ties with Sri Lanka have demonstrated a blended sack, in spite of the constituent loss of previous president Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had snappy relations with New Delhi. Be that as it may, President Maithripala Sirisena stays all around arranged and by and by put resources into better relations with India. The Maldives has demonstrated increasingly troublesome. India has proceeding with worries about the destiny of previous president Mohamed Nasheed, albeit a few guard understandings were closed amid the visit to India of the occupant Abdulla Yameen.

The conspicuous provincial exception which has Notwithstanding extensive help with the result of a year ago's overwhelming seismic tremor – that apparently included more than of alleviation material and therapeutic help to thousands – established emergency extremely set back relations. The emergency was not of India's creation – it was basically the result of contrasts between slope elites and thwas gone up against with an extreme decision. It is possible that it could have respected a defective Nepal constitution, realizing that months – maybe years that could have harmed Indian interests. Or then again it needed to make some type of move to ask to return to the more disagreeable parts of the constitution, taking a chance with the huge generosity that it had developed over the earlier year. After Indian political supplications were rejected, it picked the last mentioned. was reacting late to quick and in spite of effectively revise a few parts of the combative constitution, it has not had the capacity to beat proceeding with question or resolve the staying protected contrasts. Regarding the majority of its neighbors, including Nepal, India has made solid strides in the course of recent years to advance generosity and develop monetary and social network. Be that as it may, patriot assessments in every one of these nations – frequently coordinated against India as the locale's dominating force – will keep on displaying a test. Against Indian conclusions will likewise, incomprehensibly, drag India further into these nations' household legislative issues, proposing that undulating highs and lows in its neighborhood connections will presently be the standard. Besides, for the majority of India's neighbors, China is currently arranged to venture in to give budgetary, military, infrastructural, and even political help, and go about as a potential option in contrast to India. This new improvement is something India should cautiously screen and properly react to – as it has in ongoing years – especially if Indian security interests are truly bargained. As business as usual power in its neighborhood, India should continually play guard in its own lawn.

Crossing over tact and improvement: Utilizing international institutions to further India's domestic development has been a second true objective of India's foreign policy. This includes enhancing mechanical access, obtaining funding, adopting best practices, gaining market access, and confirming typical assets. Given the time lag between initial understandings and outcomes, a very accurate assessment might be possible in the future years. Having said that, several of the temporary markings provide encouraging clues. India has recently outperformed China in Greenfield beyond direct speculation, however it's debatable how much of that may be attributable to diplomatic efforts. Certain recent global community-focused initiatives, like Japan's remarkably low-effort fast rail line proposal, have enormous promise and, like notable Indian air terminal and metro projects in the past, might be scalable. The as of late altered assessment settlement with

Mauritius is nevertheless one case of how tact can be utilized to profit the two speculators and the legislature, and possibly increment India's expense base. The expansion of credit extensions to Africa and Iran guarantees to expand business open doors for Indian firms. What's more, verifying purchase in from real Silicon Valley companies in expanding Internet access in India denotes another exertion at propelling national improvement.

In this regard, in any case, the best test will be in binds worldwide understandings to household specialists of progress, regardless of whether explicit services, the private division, or neighborhood on-screen characters. Verifying global assentions is sufficiently hard; utilizing that to goad advancements at home is a through and through more challenging recommendation. Such inconveniences are most clearly showed in exchange strategy, which has progressively quick ramifications for household voting demographics, and in guard, where the administration is attempting to adjust the longing for barrier indigenization, business reasonability, and a failing to meet expectations open area drove safeguard modern complex. The general direction for India's improvement is unquestionably positive, and the political energy has obviously expanded. However, India still has a mountain to move to completely tackle outer contributions to progress financially, socially, and mechanically. This will be a decades-in length venture.

Traverse respect and improvement: The relations has been to utilize overall associations to drive India's neighborhood improvement. This consolidates improving mechanical access, sourcing capital, grasping best deals with, to, and confirming typical resources. In such matters, an extremely exact examination might be possible in the years to come, given initial understandings and results. That being expressed, a segment of the transient markers give promising indications. outside direct hypothesis has recently watched a skip – with India beating China – though the measure of that can be credited to propitiatory undertakings is flawed. Some new overall network situated undertakings, for instance, Japan's unimaginably negligible exertion advance for a quick rail line, have immense potential and, like conspicuous Indian metro and air terminal endeavors in the progressing past and current scenario. in this respect, regardless, the best test will be in ties overall understandings to family pros of advancement, paying little mind to whether unequivocal administrations, the private division, or neighborhood on-screen characters. It's difficult enough to check global assentions, but it's much harder to use it to make progress at home. The return system, which has logically dire consequences for family units casting ballots, and gatekeeper, where the organization is working to change the aching for obstruction indigenization, business sensibility, and a failure to meet desires uopen region driven shield present day complex, are the two areas where such issues are most evident. India's overall progress is undoubtedly in the right direction, and the country's political life has obviously expanded. In any event, India still has a long way to go before it can fully manage foreign obligations to make precise, social, and financial progress. This will take decades to complete.

Spellbound viewpoints: An of the outside strategy, especially over the previous year, should plainly indicate a vision, yet advance along all of destinations. It likewise uncovers a portion of the dissatisfactions and auxiliary impediments that go up against the Indian government and are probably going to face it for a long time going ahead. They incorporate the twin apparitions business joining with Southeast and East Asia, holes between discretionary endeavors and specialists of local usage, political protection, and relative freshness with driving on issues of worldwide administration. India obviously needs to complete a vastly improved activity staying watchful in its own neighborhood, overseeing or proactively tending to the local political aftermath of its Pakistan arrangement, and better planning outer results with inside advancement, at the same time raising its desire and improving its capacity to finish. In any case, is the expansive course or introduction of relations, and its usage. The inconsistent with open talk, which frequently sees advancements in detachment and sees realities being slamming has turned into a full-time distract of equivalent concern is the pointless of a great part of the remote approach talk. Issues should finish at the water's edge, the MOs decade has seen progressively peevish and self-serving talk on numerous territories in which there has in reality been noteworthy congruity and agreement. The changing media condition is to some degree in charge of this, similar to the conduct of the restriction parties – at various times. Assessing headway of its advantages will require a clearer evaluation of its goals, the advancement made, and India's proceeding with restrictions.

Conclusion: India's foreign policy and international reputation have been greatly influenced by its summit diplomacy activities. India has increased its diplomatic influence over the years by taking advantage of its advantageous geographic location, economic expansion, and dedication to peace and multilateral cooperation. India has prioritized peaceful cohabitation, economic cooperation, and strategic alliances in its foreign policy, from promoting regional relationships through SAARC and BIMSTEC to playing a significant role in international organizations such as the UN, G20, BRICS, and the Non-Aligned Movement. The Modi administration has adopted a proactive and practical approach to foreign relations, fortifying India's alliances with superpowers while preserving its autonomy on crucial matters like trade and nuclear non-proliferation. India's leadership in multilateral forums, its support of international disarmament, and its participation in peacekeeping missions

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ENERGY SECURITY AND INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY: DIVERSIFICATION BEYOND WEST ASIA

Nidhi Goswami

The strategic priorities surrounding energy security are progressively influencing the foreign policy frameworks of emerging economies, with India serving as a prime illustration of the convergence between national interests, energy reliance, and international diplomacy. As the world's third-largest energy consumer and one of the fastest-growing nations, India confronts a dual challenge: guaranteeing a consistent supply of energy resources while also adhering to global environmental standards. Traditionally, Indian foreign policy has been heavily dependent on energy imports from the politically unstable West Asia region. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift as India actively seeks to expand its energy partnerships beyond conventional regions and sources.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The strategic priorities surrounding energy security are progressively influencing the foreign policy frameworks of emerging economies, with India serving as a prime illustration of the convergence between national interests, energy reliance, and international diplomacy. As the world's third-largest energy consumer and one of the fastest-growing nations, India confronts a dual challenge: guaranteeing a consistent supply of energy resources while also adhering to global environmental standards. Traditionally, Indian foreign policy has been heavily dependent on energy imports from the politically unstable West Asia region. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift as India actively seeks to expand its energy partnerships beyond conventional regions and sources. This evolving path indicates a significant recalibration of India's external strategy in response to practical considerations and broader geopolitical developments.

Energy security, as defined by the International Energy Agency (IEA), involves ensuring a reliable, affordable, and sustainable supply of energy across various timeframes and geographical contexts[1]. For a nation like India, this concept encompasses additional layers — it intertwines with domestic development goals, aspirations for international influence, and the necessity to navigate an increasingly multipolar global landscape. Consequently, India's move away from exclusive reliance on West Asia is not solely a reaction to instability in that region; it also expresses its ambition for enhanced strategic autonomy and leadership within global energy governance.

This paper examines India's diversification of its energy sources through an analytical lens that integrates aspects of structural realism, complex interdependence, and global political economy. It argues that the country's developing energy alliances are indicative of efforts to mitigate geopolitical risks, counteract volatility in supply chains, and establish a foothold in contested areas related to climate governance and green technology. The primary thesis asserts that India's approach to energy-related foreign policy is evolving from passive or reactive stances towards an increasingly proactive, multi-faceted engagement aimed at reshaping global perceptions of India as a significant player within the realm of energy stakeholders.

Historical Dependency and Strategic Vulnerability

India's structural reliance on West Asia for its energy needs dates back to the oil crises of the 1970s, which prompted the nation to consolidate long-term energy partnerships with countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates[2]. By 2020, over 50% of India's crude oil imports came from the Gulf region, highlighting the significant commercial and strategic relationships that had developed between the two parties over the years. This reliance was not coincidental; it was supported by geographical closeness, advantageous bilateral agreements, and substantial Indian expatriate populations integrated into Gulf economies.

However, this pattern of dependence began to expose India to recurring geopolitical and economic risks. The protracted Iran-Iraq War, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the civil war in Yemen, and more recently, tensions between Iran and the West have all created volatility in global oil markets, which directly impacted Indian economic stability[3]. In 2019, the drone attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais, which temporarily halved Saudi Arabia's oil production, were a sobering reminder of the fragility of energy security in the Gulf[4].

Moreover, India's energy partnership with Iran — once its third-largest oil supplier — became a casualty of New Delhi's delicate diplomatic balancing act. The reimposition of U.S. sanctions on Tehran under the Trump administration in 2018 forced India to halt oil imports from Iran despite long-standing cooperation, including joint investment in the Chabahar Port project[5]. This episode underscored a fundamental limitation: India's energy policy remained highly susceptible to external diplomatic pressures, particularly from its strategic partners in the West.

Beyond the economic risks, the political alignment of Gulf states with China has also raised concerns in Indian strategic circles. For instance, Iran's 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with China, valued at approximately $400 billion, has introduced a new variable into the regional equation[6]. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's increasing involvement in China-led financial and infrastructure initiatives suggests a potential reorientation of regional energy flows and alliances.

These changes prompted a re-evaluation of policy in New Delhi. Although West Asia continues to be crucial, it can no longer be the exclusive focus of India's energy diplomacy. The imperative to establish diversified supply chains, reduce dependence on regional instabilities, and adapt to the shifting dynamics of global energy politics has driven India to explore new partnerships in Africa, Central Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Western Hemisphere.

This transition is not just a geographical change. It also involves a conceptual shift — from viewing energy as a commodity to recognising it as a strategic resource embedded within the infrastructure of state power. This perspective aligns with the realist view of energy security as vital to national survival and autonomy within an anarchic international system[7]. Simultaneously, India's participation in multilateral forums and its focus on sustainability reflect a parallel discourse rooted in neoliberal institutionalism, which promotes cooperation, mutual benefits, and the spread of norms.

3. Drivers of Diversification: Energy as Strategic Imperative

India's shift towards varied energy collaborations is motivated by factors beyond mere recognition of regional instability. It reflects a deliberate adjustment of national priorities, positioning energy as both a catalyst for development and an instrument of foreign relations, as well as a protective measure against global unrest. The interplay of structural weaknesses, changes in the geoeconomic landscape, and technological advancements has established a compelling case for this diversification.

3.1. Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar Order

The pursuit of strategic autonomy has long been a cornerstone of Indian foreign policy, particularly since the end of the Cold War. In the energy domain, this translates into minimising overdependence on any single bloc or geopolitical node. The abandonment of Iranian oil imports under American pressure, despite deep bilateral ties, revealed the fragility of India's energy sovereignty[8]. Energy diversification serves as a means to reaffirm independence within a progressively divided global landscape.

India's ability to import oil from Russia at discounted prices during the Ukraine conflict — despite Western sanctions and diplomatic resistance — further illustrates how energy flexibility enhances foreign policy independence[9]. This manoeuvre was not merely opportunistic; it demonstrated that New Delhi could operate within a contested global landscape without compromising its national interest.

3.2. Institutionalising Energy Resilience

Another critical driver is India's growing emphasis on energy resilience — the capacity to absorb supply shocks and price volatility without disrupting domestic growth. This concern became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when global supply chains fractured, and again in 2022, when crude prices soared following the Russia-Ukraine war. India responded by strengthening its strategic petroleum reserves, diversifying procurement contracts, and ramping up LNG imports from sources such as the United States and Australia[10].

Moreover, the increasing sophistication of India's energy diplomacy

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apparatus, including the creation of specialised divisions within the Ministry of External Affairs and strategic dialogues with energy-producing nations, reflects the formalisation of resilience as a state objective[11].

3.3. Energy Transition and Climate Commitments

India's alignment with global decarbonization norms, particularly under the Paris Agreement and subsequent COP negotiations, has necessitated a broadening of its energy sources. The pledge to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2070 and install 500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030 cannot be achieved without external partnerships for technology transfer, critical minerals, and investment[12].

Diversification in this context encompasses both geographical and technological aspects. India's commitment to solar diplomacy, as demonstrated by the International Solar Alliance, integrates energy collaboration within a normative and developmental context, linking energy security with global environmental governance.

3.4. Evolving Market Realities and Pricing Structures

The transformation of global energy markets, marked by the rise of shale oil, floating LNG contracts, and spot pricing, has opened new avenues for agile procurement strategies. India, which once relied on long-term fixed contracts with Gulf suppliers, is now engaging in short- and mid-term deals that prioritise flexibility over loyalty[13]. This market evolution favours diversified engagements and allows India to exploit fluctuations in regional supply and demand.

In this context, diversifying energy sources is viewed not as a protective measure but rather as a proactive strategy to adapt to the swiftly evolving and competitive global energy landscape.

4. Empirical Assessment of India's Energy Reorientation

The strategic adjustments outlined earlier are supported by tangible modifications in India's energy procurement methods, institutional collaborations, and advancements in infrastructure. These changes go beyond mere rhetoric; they can be statistically verified and are driven by policy initiatives.

4.1. Decline in West Asian Dominance

According to data from India's Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, the proportion of crude oil sourced from West Asia has declined from over 64% in 2014 to approximately 52% by 2023[14]. Simultaneously, imports from Russia, the United States, Nigeria, and Brazil have risen. Russia, in particular, accounted for less than 2% of Indian oil imports in 2021 but surged to over 20% in 2023, mainly due to discounted post-sanction pricing[15].

This transition demonstrates a calculated move away from excessive geographic concentration. It also indicates India's ability to navigate diplomatic challenges amid competition—sustaining energy partnerships with both Washington and Moscow while avoiding entanglement in strategic alliances.

4.2. Sectoral Diversification: Gas, Nuclear, and Renewables

Beyond crude oil, India has significantly expanded its procurement and infrastructure for liquefied natural gas (LNG). The country now imports LNG from Qatar, Australia, the U.S., and Mozambique, with regasification terminals operational in Gujarat, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh[16]. LNG represented almost 25% of India's gas usage in 2023, an increase from 14% in 2014.

Nuclear energy, long dominated by Indo-Russian cooperation, is now being diversified through agreements with France (EDF - Jaitapur project) and the United States (Westinghouse-Toshiba projects)[17]. These efforts are components of a larger strategy aimed at safeguarding India's energy future from dependencies on specific technologies or supply sources.

In the renewable sector, India's domestic capacity has seen significant growth, especially in solar and wind energy; however, collaboration with international partners continues to be essential. The ISA (International Solar Alliance) initiative has facilitated access to financing and technology from over 100 partner countries, supporting both domestic needs and regional leadership ambitions[18].

4.3. Strategic Reserves and Energy Security Buffering

India's establishment of strategic petroleum reserves (SPRs) is a structural innovation designed to reduce short-term exposure to global supply shocks. Located in Visakhapatnam, Mangalore, and Padur, these facilities together store over 5 million tonnes of crude oil and are being expanded under the second phase of the SPR policy[19].

These reserves, along with commercial storage facilities established through collaborations between the public and private sectors, enable India to achieve its goal of 90-day energy self-sufficiency in line with IEA standards, enhancing the nation's role as a stronger participant in global energy discussions.

4.4. Bilateral and Multilateral Energy Diplomacy

India has institutionalized energy dialogues with over 20 countries, including Australia, Brazil, the United States, France, Japan, and Russia, through formal annual summits and ministerial-level working groups[20]. At the multilateral level, India participates in the International Energy Forum, IEA association, and Clean Energy Ministerial, reinforcing its role in shaping global energy governance.

These engagements serve dual purposes: securing physical energy supply and influencing rule-making processes in areas like carbon pricing, technology sharing, and critical minerals security.

5. Geostrategic Case Studies of India's Energy Diversification

India's approach to diversifying its energy sources goes beyond being a mere theoretical policy; it is manifesting through strategies that are specifically designed for different regions, taking into account the unique geopolitical, economic, and technological contexts of each partner. This section examines significant regional areas where India has broadened its energy influence beyond the conventional West Asian domain, emphasising the intricacies, innovations, and compromises that accompany this expansion.

5.1. Africa: Building Energy Ties through Development Diplomacy

India's engagement with Africa, particularly in the hydrocarbon sector, is underpinned by a convergence of energy imperatives and developmental cooperation. Over the past decade, Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, Mozambique, and Libya have emerged as non-traditional but increasingly important oil suppliers to India[21]. Nigerian oil, similar in quality to Middle Eastern crude, offers a convenient alternative without significantly altering refinery configurations.

What differentiates India's African outreach is the developmental character of its energy diplomacy. Through the India-Africa Forum Summits (IAFS), concessional credit lines, and technical assistance programs, New Delhi has framed energy cooperation as part of a broader South-South solidarity. Indian firms such as ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL), Bharat Petroleum, and Indian Oil Corporation have secured upstream assets and operational stakes in oil blocks in Mozambique, Sudan, and Libya[22].

However, India's engagement in Africa faces several obstacles. The prevalent Chinese influence in infrastructure projects, regional political instability, and logistical issues like port constraints frequently diminish India's competitive advantage. Nonetheless, Africa is viewed as a strategic priority for the long term, particularly as India's demand continues to grow alongside ongoing volatility in the Gulf region.

5.2. Central Asia: TAPI, INSTC, and the Quest for Overland Gas

Central Asia, rich in natural gas and positioned at the crossroads of Eurasia, represents an untapped frontier in India's energy calculus. The most ambitious project in this regard is the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline. Proposed in the 1990s and intermittently revived, TAPI aims to transport over 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually to South Asia[23].

Despite ongoing political engagement and support from multiple parties, TAPI encounters significant security and infrastructure challenges. The pipeline's route through the unstable regions of southern Afghanistan and western Pakistan complicates both its construction and upkeep, posing financial and diplomatic risks. Although India officially maintains its commitment, there has been a subtle shift in its strategy towards exploring alternative overland routes and multimodal corridors.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) — a multimodal trade route connecting India, Iran, Central Asia, and Russia via sea, rail, and road — is one such alternative. India's investment in Iran's Chabahar Port and its connectivity to Zaranj-Delaram highway in Afghanistan positions it to potentially bypass Pakistan and tap into Central Asian markets indirectly[24].

The overarching approach is not solely focused on energy imports; it pertains

to geostrategic connectivity. Gaining access to Central Asian hydrocarbons is seen as a vital aspect of India's extended neighbourhood policy, aimed at revitalizing India's historical civilizational and economic ties with Eurasia.

5.3. Russia: Crisis-Induced Realignment and Strategic Hedging

Russia has become central to India's energy diversification narrative, particularly after the global fallout of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine conflict. With European markets distancing themselves from Russian energy exports, India emerged as a significant buyer, increasing its imports of Urals crude by over 800% in just one year[25]. This development was facilitated by two critical factors: heavily discounted pricing and the availability of Russian shipping and insurance mechanisms that bypassed Western restrictions.

India's interaction with Russia illustrates a sophisticated approach to strategic hedging, balancing its relationship with Moscow while avoiding estrangement from the U.S. and its partners. Purchases of crude oil frequently occurred through rupee-ruble agreements or utilised currencies from third countries, facilitating financial flexibility in the context of global sanctions.

In addition to oil, Russia is a longstanding partner in nuclear energy cooperation, most notably through the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu. The ongoing construction of multiple reactors in this complex reinforces a sectoral continuity that transcends temporary geopolitical turbulence[26].

However, India's growing energy relationship with Russia poses both reputational and strategic challenges. Numerous Western think tanks have consistently scrutinized India's stance of neutrality, and at various times, the U.S. Congress has expressed apprehensions regarding India's decision to refrain from UN resolutions that denounce Russian aggression. Nevertheless, India has skillfully managed this complex diplomatic landscape, utilizing energy trade as a means of balancing pragmatism with principled positions.

5.4. The Americas: LNG, Shale Oil, and Strategic Technology

India's foray into the Western Hemisphere reflects an effort to secure energy diversity and technological collaboration. The United States, following its shale revolution, has become a net energy exporter and a top-10 oil supplier to India. U.S. shale oil, despite its logistical distance, offers pricing flexibility and access to cutting-edge refining technologies[27].

In 2022 alone, India imported over 3 million barrels per month from the U.S., a figure that is expected to rise as the two countries deepen their Strategic Energy Partnership (SEP). Under SEP, bilateral cooperation spans not just fossil fuels but also energy efficiency, smart grids, and battery storage technologies[28].

India has strengthened its relationships with Brazil and Venezuela, both of which are significant players in Latin America's energy sector. While the political turmoil in Venezuela has restricted Indian investment opportunities lately, Indian companies continue to have interests in upstream projects, and diplomatic avenues are available for possible future collaboration.

These partnerships illustrate India's approach to energy diversification, which seeks to protect the country from fluctuations in Gulf markets and supply shortages in Asia.

5.5. Indo-Pacific: LNG Corridors and Maritime Strategy

The Indo-Pacific is a strategic maritime domain through which nearly 80% of India's energy imports pass, making it central to India's energy security. In recent years, India has sought to anchor its Act East Policy in tangible energy partnerships with Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam[29].

Australia has emerged as a reliable LNG supplier, with India importing significant volumes from terminals in Queensland and Western Australia. LNG shipping routes, often passing through the Strait of Malacca, are vulnerable to chokepoint risks, which India has sought to mitigate by investing in maritime domain awareness and naval capacity enhancement[30].

India's cooperative efforts with Vietnam in the South China Sea encompass both energy and strategic aspects. These actions demonstrate India's readiness to engage in disputed waters, reinforcing its commitment to regional resource sharing and maritime security.

Furthermore, India's participation in the Quad Clean Energy Partnership, alongside the U.S., Australia, and Japan, includes shared initiatives in critical minerals, green hydrogen, and solar manufacturing, expanding India's energy footprint from fossil resilience to clean energy innovation[31].

6. Energy Security and Climate Diplomacy: A Dual Track

India's approach to energy diplomacy has transformed from a transactional and supply-centric model to a more nuanced tool for climate engagement, especially following the Paris Agreement. The nation is working to balance its longstanding energy priorities—primarily focused on securing oil and gas—with emerging responsibilities related to climate change, decarbonization, and leadership in green initiatives. This dual-faceted strategy is not only pragmatically effective but also reflects high normative aspirations.

6.1. India as a Norm Entrepreneur in Climate-Energy Governance

With the launch of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in partnership with France in 2015, India positioned itself not just as a consumer of clean energy technologies but as a norm entrepreneur in global energy governance[32]. The ISA now includes over 100 member states, and India's leadership within it underscores an aspiration to guide the discourse around affordable solar access, particularly for developing countries.

By advancing south-south collaboration in renewable energy and providing concessional financing to nations in Africa and Southeast Asia, India is leveraging clean energy diplomacy to forge alliances and enhance its soft power image. This represents a significant transition from reliance on fossil fuels towards leadership in the energy value chain—an initiative that encompasses technology, development, and geopolitical considerations.

6.2. Strategic Minerals and Supply Chain Sovereignty

India's clean energy ambitions have also led to a new kind of resource diplomacy: one centred on critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earths. These materials are essential for manufacturing solar panels, EV batteries, and wind turbines. India has signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with Australia, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia to secure stable supplies of these resources[33].

The emphasis on these supply chains signifies a larger shift towards energy technology sovereignty, aimed at preventing India's renewable transition from being obstructed by similar dependencies that were evident in fossil fuel markets. This approach integrates climate diplomacy with strategic independence, merging ethical objectives with the necessities of hard power.

7. Foreign Policy Instruments in Energy Strategy

7.1. Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPRs)

India's strategic reserves—currently operational in Visakhapatnam, Mangalore, and Padur—can store over 5 million tonnes of crude oil and are being expanded under a second phase to include Chandikhole in Odisha. These reserves, coupled with commercial storage facilities, provide India with buffer capacity to endure disruptions caused by geopolitical tensions or price surges[34].

The reserves also strengthen India's position in international energy discussions, where the ability to accumulate resources is a significant factor in geopolitical influence. For instance, in the wake of the oil price collapse in 2020, India utilized its reserves to acquire oil at reduced prices, showcasing its capability for strategic purchasing and adaptability in the market.

7.2. Institutional Diplomacy: Dialogues and Multilateralism

India has institutionalized energy dialogues with more than 20 countries, including structured working groups on hydrocarbons, renewables, LNG, and nuclear cooperation. These dialogues are not limited to procurement but include collaboration in R&D, grid modernization, and decarbonization technologies[35].

Multilaterally, India is an active participant in:

- IEA as an associate member
- International Energy Forum (IEF)
- Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM)
- G20 Energy Transition Working Group

Through these channels, India plays a role in shaping global energy standards while utilizing data access, predictive models, and emergency response strategies. Such interactions integrate India's national energy transition within international governance frameworks.

7.3. Energy PSUs as Strategic Actors

Indian public sector undertakings (PSUs) such as ONGC Videsh, Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), GAIL, and NTPC are increasingly operating as extensions of Indian diplomacy, acquiring stakes in oil blocks, LNG terminals, and power grids globally. For example, ONGC Videsh holds interests in 33 oil and gas projects across 15 countries, including Russia, Vietnam, Venezuela, and South Sudan[16].

Such commercial diplomacy allows India to project economic presence even in politically sensitive regions without direct state-to-state entanglement. It also provides a vehicle for India to experiment with new energy technologies in global environments before scaling them domestically.

8. Challenges and Contradictions in India's Energy Realignment

India's strategy for diversification is complex and future-oriented, yet it faces fundamental tensions and unresolved challenges that hinder its implementation and sustainability over time.

8.1. Structural Dependence and Energy Inertia

Despite a growing portfolio of suppliers, India still imports over 85% of its crude oil and 50% of its natural gas, with West Asia remaining the dominant source[37]. These structural dependencies are difficult to unwind without massive infrastructural and market overhauls.

Furthermore, India's refining capabilities are specifically designed to handle crude oil from the Middle East, and modifying this setup necessitates substantial financial investment. The inherent stability of energy infrastructure establishes a path dependency that constrains both the speed and extent of diversification.

8.2. Transition Paradox: Green Commitments vs. Fossil Realities

India's simultaneous commitment to decarbonization and fossil-fuel security creates a paradox. While the share of renewables in electricity generation is growing, coal still accounts for over 45% of the overall energy mix[38]. Oil demand is expected to rise till at least 2040, driven by transport and industrial growth.

This paradox of energy transition brings into question the credibility of international climate discussions, particularly as India seeks climate financing and technology transfers while simultaneously increasing its fossil fuel capacity. Additionally, it highlights the constraints of diplomatic efforts towards transition when economic growth relies on fossil fuels.

8.3. Geopolitical Constraints on Diversification

Not all diversification efforts are immune to geopolitics. The TAPI pipeline, for instance, remains stuck due to instability in Afghanistan and strained India-Pakistan relations. India's access to Chabahar Port and its linkage to Central Asia are similarly impeded by U.S. sanctions on Iran, highlighting the limits of overland energy corridors[39].

Additionally, India's increasing partnership with the United States has negatively impacted its traditional alliances, such as with Iran, where collaboration in the energy sector has significantly decreased despite longstanding strategic interests. In its effort to diversify, India occasionally replaces one dependence with another, particularly when it comes to relying on imported technologies for renewable energy and essential minerals.

9. Strategic Futures: Projecting Indian Energy Policy Forward

India's future in energy diplomacy is expected to be shaped by an approach of adaptive realism, which seeks to harmonize commitments to sustainability with practical considerations regarding energy security. The focus will need to shift from a bilateral framework towards incorporating energy within a wider context that emphasizes technological independence, regional power dynamics, and multilateral governance.

One probable development includes India enhancing its leadership in green multilateralism through initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and the Quad Clean Energy Initiative. At the same time, India will likely adopt hedging strategies for fossil fuel acquisition, particularly sourcing from suppliers in Russia, Africa, and Latin America, while also prioritizing advancements in critical technologies such as battery storage, green hydrogen, and smart grid systems.

10. Conclusion: Energy Diplomacy as Foreign Policy Core

India's approach to energy diversification represents a notable shift in its foreign policy execution. Energy has transitioned from being merely an outcome of diplomatic efforts to becoming a catalyst for international relationships. This change is both strategic and structural, as India aims to address the intertwined challenges of geopolitical instability and climate obligations.

Despite existing structural dependencies and inconsistencies in policies, India's multifaceted strategy towards energy diplomacy — which encompasses fossil fuels, renewable sources, and access to technology — distinguishes it among other emerging nations. The true effectiveness of this transition hinges not only on diplomatic flexibility but also on India's capacity to invest in infrastructure, foster institutional unity, and demonstrate energy resilience as a form of strategic influence.

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INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY: EMERGING TRENDS INDIA`S MULTIALIGNMENT STRATEGY IN CHANGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

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International structure is anarchic in nature which is shifting from liberal to realistic world order where countries are engaged in fulfilling their national interest and influencing the global politics. Number of power blocs has significant economic, political, cultural and ideological influences, which affects the balance of power and international stability. In the contemporary world order emerging economies including India, Brazil, China, and South Africa are challenging the traditional hegemonic status of US. Global power and its dynamics are changing from unipolar towards multipolar world order as power is distributed among various countries rather than being concentrated in one or two dominant powers. India is a largest democracy in the world with huge market economy which encourages India to adopt multilateral strategy with multi-alignment approach. Being an emerging economy India is trying to shape multipolar world order and manage its geopolitical affairs by strengthening its leadership in multilateral institutions including SCO, BRICS, and G20, QUAD. These multilateral alliances promote regional equality, collective security, balance of power and global security among member countries also focus on many issues including climate change, sustainability and terrorism. These institutions not only promoting south-south cooperation but also deepen the India`s relations with the West and Eurasia which empowered India to take its stand diplomatically on the global turf. The main objective of this paper is to analysis India`s strategic autonomy, multilateral engagements on the global stage and the decline of traditional hegemony of existing power. This paper also examines that how emerging economies especially India is shaping the multipolar word order.

Keywords: Foreign policy, Emerging trends, Strategic autonomy, Multipolar world order, Emerging economy, Multi-alignment, Multilateralism.

Introduction

India as an emerging economy plays a pivotal role in shaping a multipolar world order. Its economic rise enhances the global growth and challenges traditional Western power and China.[1] Many states get influenced with the large consumer base of India and with its growing industrial capacity, digital innovation which make it a crucial hub for trade and investment. India being an emerging power adopts a balanced global economy with its economic partners across the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. India tries to expand its role in advanced technologies including IT, AI, space, pharmaceuticals and contributes to global energy security through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance. Politically, India uses platforms such as BRICS, G20, QUAD, and its leadership to the Global South to ensure fair representation of developing nations by advocating reforms in the global institutions including UN, IMF, and WTO. Therefore, India acts as a driver of global growth by fostering its relations with diverse blocs and fostering balancing power in a multipolar order.

International world order is transitioning from unipolar to multipolar world order where emerging powers including India, China, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa are trying to challenge the existing hegemonic status of the United States.[2] Being an emerging economy India is influencing the contemporary world order and adopting the multi-alignment approach. India as a largest democracy with rich culture and heritage holds a strategic position in the world which attracts international actors to deal with Indian economy and strengthen their economic, strategic and cultural ties with India. The foreign policy of India is changing from non-alignment to multi-alignment and shaping the contemporary world order. India as a sovereign state using strategic- autonomy on the global level and adopting diplomatic practices to establish its relations with competing giants especially the United States, China, and Russia. "Strategic autonomy refers to a nation`s ability to make sovereign decisions in foreign policy and defense without being constrained by external pressures or alliance obligations. It is not synonymous with isolationism or neutrality. Rather, it implies flexibility, independence and the capacity to engage with multiple powers on one`s own terms".[3] International world order depends on the strategic autonomy of any country that how any state takes decision and frames its foreign policy independently without getting influenced by any external pressure. The foreign policy of India is changing from Nehru`s non-alignment during the Cold War to the Modi government`s multi-alignment in the current era. Decline of the traditional existing power can be highlighted with the help of new emerging power such as India. India as emerging economy challenges the existing world order by expanding its ties not only with US but also with Russia, China, and with its neighboring states in view of the fact that India`s economic policy is dynamic, flexible, and capable to engage with multiple powers. Because every state maintains its political relations as per their economic base and their economic dependency on another country where sates are engaged to fulfill their national interest in terms of power according to the realistic theory of international relations. Therefore, this paper provides political as well as economic perspective of India`s role in shaping a multipolar world order where no single power dominates.

This paper analysis that how India is leveraging its economic diplomacy to global influence and maintains its strategic autonomy on the global stage. India is an emerging power in global politics with largest democracy in the world which aspires other countries to strengthen their strategic and diplomatic relations with India. The paper based on India`s Ascendency in a Multipolar world: which will give insights to the scholars of international relations that How world order is changing from unipolar towards multipolar order and the role of India as an emerging economy in it. This paper is also helpful for policy makers to understand the realistic international view of states where states are engaging with various new alliances for instances G20, QUAD, BRICS, and many more to boost up their economic, military, and diplomatic strength and to fulfilling their national interest. It provides a deep understanding to the readers that how world order is changing and why traditional hegemony of the United States is declining.

India`s foreign policy shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment

'Foreign policy of any country emphasizes those actions, principles, norms, policies which help any state to maintain its relations with another country in an anarchic international world order.' India's foreign policy has evolved from Nehru's non-alignment to a pragmatic strategy of multi-alignment, reflecting its pursuit of strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.[4]

It can be noted that India's foreign policy is shifting from non-alignment to multi-alignment approach which provides a major shift in Indian foreign policy. During the period of Cold War India adopted independent and non-alignment approach under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. This approach aimed to keep India independent power blocs led by the United States and The Soviet Union. This approach allowed India to pursue autonomous foreign policy and focused on peaceful-coexistence, development, and anti-colonialism. This cornerstone of India's foreign diplomacy projected India's neutrality on the global turf. But with the end of the Cold War and with the changing nature of world order India's foreign policy moved towards the approach of multi-alignment which reflects India's multilateral engagement and active participation with international organizations (UNO, WTO, IMF), multiple alliances (QUAD, BRICS), and with various global forums including G20, I2U2. This approach of India defines it's strategic-flexibility and strategic autonomy where India engages with multiple powers to fulfill its national interest. For instances India's engagement in QUAD with US and Japan for Indo-pacific security, BRICS with Russia to maintain strategic relations, and with China for economic cooperation. The core principle of Indian foreign policy is 'Strategic Autonomy' which is intact and preserved as non-alignment approach emphasized autonomy in the bipolar world and the multi-alignment strategy focuses on the relevance and influence in today's multipolar world order with changing realities. Therefore, foreign diplomats stated that, **"India's transformation from non-alignment to multi-alignment demonstrates a strategic recalibration aimed at maximizing autonomy while engaging with multiple power centers".**[5]

Supporting Arguments

- **Shamsi, A.F. et.al. (2011). India as an Emerging Economy.** In this paper author explains that India is one of the largest economies in the world with prominent emerging market as well. This paper also examines the economic state of India in terms of strategy, mindset and its implications. This paper highlights various obstacles which impede the economic growth of India in becoming an economic power house, one major concern that might hamper the growth is the competitive strategy and hostile relations with neighbors. This paper includes the successful models of China, Germany and Japan and

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how India can use its collaborative strategy with these emerging economies to alleviate its growth and for becoming an economic power house of the world.

- **Ali, W. and Rasslas, M. (2024). Global Power Dynamics: The Role of Emerging Economies in Shaping a Multipolar World.** In this paper author explains the global power dynamics of 21st century and the role of emerging economies in shaping world order. Emerging economies, including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa are challenging hegemony of traditional power and trying to shift unipolar world order into a multipolar world order. These economies play a pivotal role in shaping global governance by spreading their trade networks, trade alliances, growing share in global GDP, and their leadership in multilateral institutions such as BRICS, and the G-20. This paper critically analysis the interplay between emerging and existing powers and how this dynamic foster both cooperation and competition.

- **Tharoor, S. (2025). India`s strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.** This article explains that how is India using its strategic autonomy on the global stage and acts as an important player in this multipolar world. In this article author argues that amid shifting global power dynamics India must preserve its ability to make independent foreign poi. ' choices and make interest-based engagements with multiple powers rather than isolation or rigid neutrality. Here, strategic autonomy also depends on strengthening domestic capabilities in economy, technology, and defense. He suggests that India should act as bridge-builder in the multipolar order, and advancing its national interest while shaping global norms.

- **Bhaduli, P. (2024). India`s G20 Presidency and Global Governance.**[6] In this paper author points out the pivotal role of India in the global forums including G20 and defines how India holds a crucial position on the international platforms with its multilateral collaborations. Main focused area of this paper is to analysis the India`s G20 presidency and its broader role in global governance, with the aim of creating a world that is sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous for everyone.

- **Kumar, S, et.al. (2025). India: Voice of the Global South in QUAD.**[7] This paper highlights the crucial role of India as the sole member from the global South and the only developing nation in the QUAD which includes US, Japan, India, and Australia. In this paper author explains the strategic importance of QUAD in the contemporary world order and how India tries to act as a bridge between a QUAD and Global south in vaccine diplomacy, climate justice, and digital connectivity. This paper examines that how India is rising as a voice of the global South in QUAD which focuses on the strategic collaboration, military cooperation, technological innovation, and economic partnerships to foster regional stability among its partners.

- **Das, J.R. (2025). India`s Role in a Multipolar World: Balancing Global Powers.**[8] This paper explores India`s evolving foreign policy with its strategic autonomy. In this paper author highlights the global position of India as a key player and as a leading voice for the Global South. In the evolving multipolar world India is adopting diplomatic path to maintain its strategic position amidst the growing tensions between the United States and China. As a rising power, India handles the complexities of geopolitics by balancing its security and economic interests with the engagement of various multilateral platforms like BRICS, G20, and the QUAD. Therefore, this paper examines the changing trends of Indian Foreign policy, challenges, and opportunities in a multipolar world.

- **Wade, R.H. (2011). Emerging World Order? From Multipolarity to Multilateralism in the G20, the World Bank, and the IMF.**[9] This paper explains about the shift of world economy from "unipolar" towards "multipolar" and how developing and transitional countries have grown faster than advanced economy as distribution of world income has shifted in their favor. This paper analysis how world order is emerging and BASIC group of countries [Brazil, South Africa, India, China] has become in international fora. Author explains that how several other emerging economies including China which is now second largest economy in the world behind the United States and ahead of Japan challenges the G7 economies and the authority and influence within multilateral organizations like the G20, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

- **Farooq, H. et.al. (2020). The 21st Century World Order: Rise of China and Challenges to American Global Hegemony.**[10] This paper analysis that how and why American traditional hegemony is declining and how China and Russia are challenging the US hegemonic status. In the past century the dynamics of global politics have been consistently changing from multipolar to bipolar and then unipolar structure but in the contemporary world system international politics undoubtedly in a transitioning phase which is shifting towards a multipolar world order where besides the US, China and Russia will play a significant role and will influence the geopolitics of the world.

The historical background of the emerging global order

The historical background if the emerging world order can be analyzed with the help of three phases. **First phase**, the era of bipolarity when world order is dominated by the two superpowers after the World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union. **Second phase,** at the end of the Cold War 1991 when USSR disintegrated the era of unipolar world dominated by the sole superpower that is US which sets global norms, rules, and policies. "The US-led order had three pillars: first, the unrivalled extent and many dimensions of US power; second, the Western-dominated institutions and multilateral organizations originally created in the wake of the Second World War - the United Nations, the **General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade** (GATT) the **World Trade Organization** (WTO) from 1995), and the **World Bank** and **International Monetary Fund;** and third, the dense network of alliances and close bilateral relationships across the Atlantic and Pacific".[11] This phase emphasized liberal democracy and market-oriented economic reforms which allowed countries to come together and make cooperation on economic and security issues. **Third phase**, by the 2000s this phase has created a more diverse global landscape where emerging economies including China, India, Brazil, and growing influence of BRICS, ASEAN, and the Global South came into limelight which changes the unipolar world towards multipolar one. Multipolarity fosters shared leadership, importance of multilateral forums (G20, BRICS, SCO, QUAD) and reduces relative dominance of US which reflects the complexity of 21st century global politics including non-state actors, technology, diverse trade and investment, and global challenges such as climate change. Therefore, in these changing dynamics of global politics India acts as a driver of global growth and tries to strengthen its relations with its immediate neighbors, regional powers, US, Russia through its active involvement in the global forums.

O1. India`s strategic autonomy and multilateral engagement on the global stage

Strategic autonomy is a core principle of India`s foreign policy which enables India to take any decision effectively or independently without getting influenced by any external pressure or without being aligned with any major power bloc.[3] This approach allows India to adopt balanced approach at the global stage and maintains its relations with global powers including the United States, Russia, China, and others effectively. India balances its relationship with the United States as well as with Russia which can be highlighted through India`s involvement in Western-led initiatives like the QUAD and Eastern-forums like BRICS and SCO. Recently India`s firm stand can be seen when the United States imposed heavy amount of tariff on India for importing Russian oil but India did not stop to buying Russian oil and still continue to import it which clearly shows India's independent decision which India took without any external pressure. India is a largest democracy in the world which uses its power to strengthen its political, economic, and diplomatic relations with diverse partners and uses its soft-power to attract global actors.

India`s multilateral engagement with multilateral forums:

Multilateral forum/ grouping	Agreement/ Pact	Year	Brief description
I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-USA)12	Joint statement committing to investments in food-perks, renewable energy, clean-tech	2022	On July 14 2022 the leaders of I2U2 announced an investment of USD 2 billion (UAE- India) for integrated food perks, plus a hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat.

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)13	Joint statement supporting India's G20 presidency	2023	At the 15th BRICS summit (Aug 2023) the BRICS leaders supported India's G20 presidency and the inclusion of the African Union in G20
G2013	New Delhi leaders' declaration; inclusion of African Union; launch of Global Biofuels Alliance & India-middle East-Europe corridor	2023	During India's G20 presidency (hosted Sep 9-10 2023) the leaders' declaration was adopted, the African Union was invited, and new major initiatives in biofuels and connectivity were announced
Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD: India, US, Japan, Australia)14	Foreign minister's meeting, New Delhi	2023	On 3 March the QUAD Foreign Ministers met in New Delhi and reaffirmed commitment to a free & open Indo-Pacific, rule of law, peaceful settlement of disputes
BRICS13	Johannesburg II Declaration- trade ministers meeting	2025	India and other members endorsed joint declarations on WTO reform, digital economy governance, trade & MSMEs
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)15	AI cooperation pact among member-states including India	2025	During the SCO summit (Sept 2025) member agreed to deepen cooperation in artificial intelligence; India emphasized equal rights in AI development

India also actively participates in various multilateral forums including G20, BRICS, SCO, QUAD, I2U2 which focuses on the strategic collaboration, military cooperation, technological innovation, infrastructure development and economic partnerships to foster regional stability among its partners. As a member of G20 India contributes to discussions on global economic governance, sustainable development and acts as a voice of the Global South[6]. India as an emerging power tries to boost up its relations with China, Russia, US and with its neighboring countries to foster economic cooperation and regional security. It collaborates with BRICS members (Brazil, Russia, China, South Africa) to promote economic and diplomatic cooperation. For instances SCO summit 2025, which was held in Tianjin, China and recently held 16th BRICS Summit-2024, hosted by Russia highlighted the views of world's emerging economies including Brazil, China, India, and South Africa.[16] Western-led initiatives like QUAD a strategic forum in which India occupies a crucial position along with the United States, Japan, and Australia. This forum emphasizes a free and open Indo-Pacific[7]. India`s engagement with I2U2 which includes Israel, the United States, the United Arab Emirates and aims to address infrastructure development and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa.

India`s rapid economic growth has positioned it as one of the world's most important growth engines. India has a large consumer base with a unique cultural fabric, huge market, digital innovation, infrastructure expansion, and demographic advantage strengthen its role as a fast-growing economy in the multipolar world order. Amitabh Kant, India`s G20 sherpa, has projected that between 2035-2040, nearly 30% of global GDP growth will come from India.[17]

India`s economic approach is becoming more liberal, inclusive, resilience, and globally integrated. Since 1991 by adopting Liberalization, Privatization, Globalization (LPG) Indian economy shifted from state-controlled to a market-oriented economy which encourages heavy FDI, private sector participation and low trade barriers. India`s policies emphasize strategic autonomy in global trade diversifying supply chains, promoting South-South cooperation, and strengthening voice in G20, BRICS, and WTO reforms.

O1.1 There are following points which show the Indias` global engagement as an emerging economy:

❖ **Digital Innovation:** India has become a leader in digital public infrastructure (including Aadhaar, UPI)[25] and IT services not only within country but outside the nation for instances recently India launches its UPI services in Qatar October, 2025. India has become a global example of inclusive digital governance which showcased its Digital public infrastructure during the G20, when India provided various digital public good to many developing nations. 'India is also emerging as a hub for artificial intelligence, fintech, and digital health solutions, giving it technological leverage in global negotiation'.[18]

Sustainable Development: In the G20 presidency, 2023 India launched the Green Development Pact, which linked climate action with equitable growth ad emphasized lifestyle changes for sustainability (LiFE- Lifestyle for Environmental initiative). Therefore, India acts as a strong promoter of inclusive and sustainable growth which also emphasizes its domestic commitments such as Swachh Bharat Mission, Clean Ganga Mission and its climate-based models globally.

❖ **Energy Transition:** Being an emerging economy India has managed to expand renewables faster than most major economies as India is the third-largest energy consumer. India also co-founded International Solar Alliance in 2015, with coalition of more than 120 countries to promote solar energy and renewable energy. Under the National Hydrogen Mission, India is aiming to become a global hub for green hydrogen production[19]. "India has set ambitious domestic targets achieving 500GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030 and reaching net-zero emission by 2070".[19] These initiatives show the ascendency of India as an emerging economy and its credibility in shaping a multipolar world order where India always tries to strengthen its soft power and normative leadership worldwide by expanding its engagement with international economic forums.

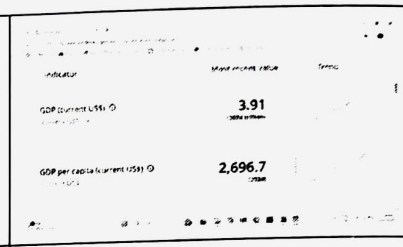
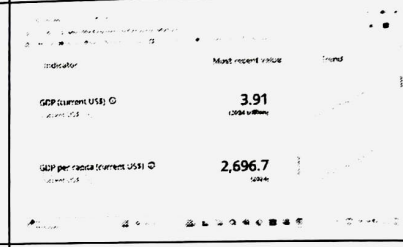
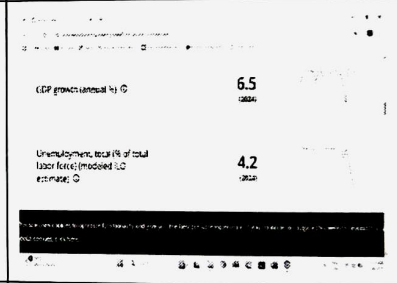
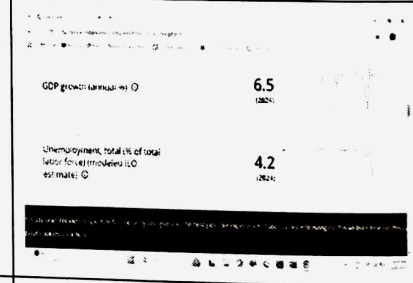
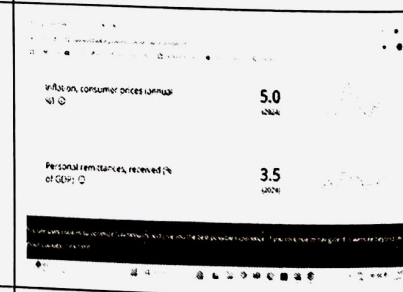
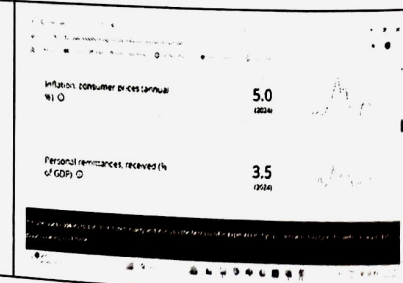
Therefore, these engagements reflect India`s commitment to a multipolar world order, where power is distributed among multiple states rather than dominated by one. These multilateral alliances and international forums provide opportunities for India to assert its influence on the world stage but also presents challenges in aligning with diverse partners on the global issues.

O1.2 Comparing India`s Economy with BRICS countries along with the US on the following parameters: [20, 21, 22, 23]

	Basis of the comparison	India	USA	BRICS (5-member block)
1.	Nominal GDP (current US$)	~ US$ 3.91 trillion	largest in world	Combined over US$27 trillion in 2024
2.	Real GDP Growth (annual %)	~ 6.5% (India)	~ 2.8% (US, 2024)	BRICS~ 4% in 2024
3.	GDP per capita (current US$)	US$ 2,696.7 in 2024	US$ ~ 89,600 (per IMF data for 2024)	Average lower than advanced economies; large variation across members
4.	GDP per capita (ppp)	US$ 11,158.9 (2024)	(High, advanced economy level)	BRICS share of global GDP (PPP) ~ 37.3%
5.	Population size	~ 1.4 billion (India) (Implied)	~ 340 million (US)	BRICS ~ 33 billion people
6.	Share of world economy (GDP, PPP)	India ~ 8.23% globally within BRICS block	US~ 14.5% globally (PPP)	BRICS ~ 37.3% of global GDP (PPP)

7.	Economic structure (service vs. industry etc.)	Emerging economy with growing services sector (India)	Advance economy with dominant services sector	BRICS vary widely from advanced (China) to less advanced (South Africa)
8.	Human development/ income level	Relatively low per-capita income, large gap with advanced economies	Hing per-capita income, advanced human development	BRICS have diverse human development; lower average than advanced economies
9.	Growth potential/ momentum	Hing growth rate (~ 6-7%) suggests strong momentum	Slower growth (~ 2-3%), large base size	BRICS overall growing faster than many advanced economies
10.	Global role and strategic significance	Rising global economic role; India`s share in world economy doubled since 2000	World`s largest economy by nominal GDP; major global influence	BRICS increasingly important block in global economy and geopolitics

Source: Data has taken from various reports including World Bank, IMF, BRICS accounts India`s Global Economic Rise:[21]

	GDP (current US$)	(2000) 468.4 billion (2024 trillion) 3.91	
	GDP per capita (current US$)	(2000) 442.8 (2024) 2,696.7	
	GDP growth (annual %)	(2000) 3.8 (2024) 6.5	
	Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)	(2000) 7.6 (2024) 4.2	
	Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)	(2000) 4 (2024) 5.0	
	Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)	(2000) 2.8 (2024) 3.5	

Source: World Bank Group report 2024

O2. The decline of traditional hegemony of existing power and the changing order of world politics: The traditional hegemony of the United States is declining and the transformation of world politics into a multipolar order are driven. In the contemporary world order rising competitors including China, India, Brazil are challenging the US hegemonic status. For instances China`s Belt and Road initiative and India`s digital economy, multilateral engagements and its soft power have expanded and experienced rapid growth which exemplify the shift in the global politics.[24] In military concern, US maintains significant military capabilities which can be manifested through its prolonged conflict in the middle-east and the amount of military and economic aid it provided to Ukraine during Russia-Ukraine war since the war started. But in the changing world order emerging powers such as China, Russia are trying to foster their military strength by modernizing their military forces, and contributing to a more multipolar security environment. In the field of technological advancement rising nations China and India are making significant research in areas such as artificial intelligence, space exploration, and digital infrastructure which challenging the United States' technological supremacy and creating more competitive global order. Domestic political shift within the US and its isolationist tendencies, fluctuating foreign policy, and impulsive decision making at global stage are weakening its global leadership role. Due to these shifts US-led liberal international order has encountered challenges and promoted other nations to seek alternative platforms for cooperation. This situation has led to the strengthening of regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS grouping which playing their pivotal role in shaping multipolar world order and asserting their interests outside the US-dominated frameworks. The Global South countries including Africa, Latin America, and Asia also advocate more equitable international order that can reflect their interests and perspective at international stage and can increase their voice in global affairs. Therefore, India acts as a voice for the Global South which can be highlighted through its membership in QUAD, G20 presidency in 2023 and BRICS summit 2025[7].These new alliances and grouping challenge the US hegemonic status and reflects the changing dynamics of global politics and influence.

Conclusion And Findings: The contemporary international system is transitioning from unipolar to multipolar world order as power is distributed among various countries rather than being concentrated in one or two dominant powers. The US hegemonic status is declining and centers of multiple power is rising in which India is playing a crucial role in shaping the more balanced, cooperative, and inclusive global order through its growing economic strength, democratic values, and independent foreign policy.[25] India is rising as a voice of the global South (G20, SCO, BRICS) which focuses on the strategic collaboration, South-South cooperation, technological innovation, and economic partnerships to foster regional stability among its partners.[25] India is using a pragmatic approach to safeguarding its national interest and expanding its engagements in multiple international forums which seems like power is shifting towards Asia. In the emerging world order, power is shifting to a more complex and interdependent multipolar world. India`s rise as an emerging power is affecting the global politics as it is attracting world leaders and increasing global attention through its sustained growth, demographic advantage, and technological progress but due to competitive nature of global policies India`s economic growth gets impede. India`s increasing engagements in the multiple alliances with its strategic autonomy reflects its aspiration to act as stabilizing force among major powers while safeguarding its national interests but in this current scenario India needs to be more vocal with its decisions and aspirations at global level as great power rivalries can complicate India`s global position in the future. India needs to tackle all the challenges diplomatically including its uneven economic development, energy dependency, and its geopolitical tensions with China and Pakistan. Additionally, emerging economies are challenging US hegemonic status which can create threat for rising powers including India, China, Brazil, and South Africa as any existing power does not want to lose its influence instead it always supports the condition of status-quo. Therefore, there is need to explore some unfocused areas that how India`s economic and diplomatic strategies are redefining global power relations.

Findings:

- India`s influence as a voice of global south with growing engagements in multilateral institution is shaping the multipolar world order and changing the dynamics of world politics which attracts many global powers to make alliances with India to fulfill their desired economic and diplomatic interest.
- India is using strategic autonomy to take any decision on the global stage which shows its balanced approach with global powers whether its economic and strategic relations with the United States or its long-term friendship with Russia.
- Rising powers including Russia, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa is challenging the US hegemony and promoting Multipolarity in the world which clearly shows the shifting in world power towards Asia.
- India acts as non-Western not an anti-Western[3] because being a rising power India does not want to replace US hegemony but wants to promote more balanced, cooperative, and equitable international order.
- India`s growing engagements with multiple institutions fosters India`s leadership in the world but also creates hindrances in the path of changing trends of India`s foreign policy as India cannot use moderate approach all the time it needs to be more vocal with its decisions. International thinker **Henry Kissinger** stated in 1994 that "We do not have friends, we do not have enemies, we only have interests".

Limitations of the Study:

- Global politics is dynamic in nature. Shifting in powers, rise of India, and decline in the U.S. hegemonic status are continuing processes, making it difficult to draw a permanent and an absolute conclusion.
- This paper mainly covers the India`s strategic autonomy and multilateral engagement on the global stage and its role in a multipolar world order but this paper has wide scope and it is not possible to cover each and every aspect related to the mentioned topic.

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INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION (SCO): AN ANALYSIS

Roshani Kumari

Strategic autonomy has been one of the central pillars of Indian foreign policy since independence. Historically, this principle is associated with non-alignment policy, but its relevance is redefined in the contemporary multipolar world.The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) gives India a platform for cooperation in different sectors, such as regional security, counterterrorism, energy connectivity, and many others. At the same time, the SCO presents challenges for India that raise questions about its strategic autonomy. Thus, the research examines how India maintains strategic autonomy under this SCO. It also discusses and interprets the strategic implications for India along with challenges and opportunities.

Keywords: Strategic autonomy, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Foreign Policy, Non-alignment, India.

Introduction

India's foreign policy has historically been guided by the principle of strategic autonomy.[1] In the Cold War era, this idea was express through the Non-Alignment Movement and in the recent decades, it has evolved into a policy of multi-alignment.[2] The primary objective has been to safeguard sovereignty and allow India to make independent choices in world politics and engage with the multiple power centres without being tied to any rigid bloc. The multilateral institutions have played a crucial role in this orientation. It provides India a platforms to enhance visibility, secure national interests and avoid binding commitments.

Within this trajectory, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has emerge as a significant multilateral forum in Eurasia. Initially, it was founded in 2001 as a regional grouping focus on regional security and border stability.[3] The SCO has gradually expanded into a broader institution encompassing political dialogue, counterterrorism, economic cooperation and the connectivity.[4] The SCO is not a military bloc. It works through dialogue and consensus, allowing members to retain flexibility. India became a full member of this organisation in 2017.[5] Its entry brought South Asia into the organisation and added weight to debates on terrorism, sovereignty, and regional balance.

The study of India's strategic autonomy within the SCO is necessary for several reasons. First, the organisation is dominated by China and Russia, both of which seek to shape Eurasian order, thereby raising questions about India ability to safeguard its independence. Second, Pakistan membership introduces additional challenges, particularly on the issue of terrorism narratives.Third, SCO expanding agenda intersects with India's energy security, connectivity interests, and its need to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, making it a contested multilateral space where India must assert its preferences. Hence, examining India contribution in the SCO provides valuable insights into how New Delhi balances structural constraints with opportunities for advancing its regional and global role.

Thus, the central research question of this article is how India maintains strategic autonomy within the SCO while handling great power rivalries and regional difficulties. It also interprets the strategic implications of India membership by examining both opportunities as well as challenges arising from China dominance and Pakistan inclusion. Methodologically, this study is based exclusively on secondary data, including academic literature, policy analyses, official reports and published speeches. By relying on these sources, the article undertakes a qualitative and interpretative analysis that embedded India involvement inside the SCO within the broader framework of its foreign policy and strategic autonomy.

Strategic Autonomy in International Relations

Strategic autonomy is a central principle of India foreign policy and has remain consistent despite shifts in the international system. It refers to the ability of a state to safeguard its independence of action and decision-making in matters of national interest. As Bajpai notes, "strategic autonomy refers to a foreign policy posture where a nation is capable of adopting an independent stand without external influence on core issues of its national interests".[6] Rajiv Sikri emphasises that it is essentially a "dependence-control strategy" designed to maintain freedom in decision-making while protecting vital assets.[7] Vinod Kumar further explains that the practice of autonomy is closely linked to the state's capabilities and to the prevailing structure of the international system.[8]

The evolution of strategic autonomy in India has taken place in two broad phases. The first phase was the policy of non-alignment during the Cold War. Under Nehru, non-alignment was projected as an assertion of independence rather than passive neutrality. Nehru explained in Parliament that India's policy was rooted in its civilisational outlook and was meant to protect national freedom in international affairs.[9] This help India resist pressures from both superpower blocs while preserving space to cooperate selectively with the Soviet Union and other partners. The second phase emerge after the end of the Cold War. With the decline of bipolar world order and the rise of multipolarity, India reinterpreted its traditional attachment to autonomy in more dynamic way. The emphasis shifted from rigid non-alignment to pragmatic multi-alignment policy. As Chandra observes, India active participation in forums like the SCO, BRICS and the Quad reflects this adaptation, where the principle of autonomy continues but the method of practice has become issue-based as well as multi-directional.[10] Hence, this shows continuity in the idea of autonomy, but with greater flexibility in application.

India strategic autonomy can be understood through various theoretical lenses in the international relations. From a realist perspective, autonomy signifies a state's strategy of self-preservation and security in an anarchic international system.[11] India engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reflects this. India seeks to maximise its space for manoeuvre and resist entanglement in rigid blocs. It also aims to balance China growing influence. This approach prevent India from ceding ground to rivals without entering binding alliances. As one scholar notes, "India's strategic autonomy is a realist mutation of the traditional non-aligned posture".[12] It involves the strategies to balance independence in foreign policy and security decisions.

Liberal institutionalism offers another view. It interprets India participation in the multilateral frameworks as a way to promote cooperation and the dialogue while maintaining policy independence. The SCO as a "consultative forum" with an absence of binding commitments, allows India to engage without compromising its sovereignty.[13] This membership enhances its regional visibility and preserves its freedom to pursue independent foreign policy objectives. India's multi-alignment strategy demonstrates this. It engages with diverse groupings without binding itself into rigid alliances. This is "not about hedging, but about optimising engagement, maximising benefits while minimising compromise".[14]

Constructivist approaches highlights the role of ideas, norms, and identity. India's emphasis on autonomy stems from its historical experience, including its colonial past. Its foreign policy is deeply rooted in its civilisation, history and culture.[15] Principles like non-alignment and anti-colonialism are derived from these experiences. This includes the value of "Vasudeva Kutumbakam" the world is one family. Strategic autonomy for India is thus both about power-politics and responsibilitie.[16] These perspectives collectively illustrate how India's strategic autonomy functions within global power structures, institutions, and evolving ideas.

In the context of multilateral organisations, strategic autonomy takes on practical significance. States use these platforms to promote national goals, shape norms, and enhance visibility, but also seek to maintain freedom of action despite institutional constraints. For India, the SCO illustrates this balance. Its consensus-based structure and absence of binding enforcement allow India to participates actively without compromising sovereignty. As Saini observes, India employs such forums to safeguard autonomy, balance great power rivalries, and project itself as responsible key actor.[17] Thus, strategic autonomy in multilateral settings represents both continuity with India's traditional foreign policy and adaptation to new global realities.

Historical Background of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation emerge from the "Shanghai Five" mechanism, which was founded in 1996 and the original members included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.[18] This initial grouping was crucial for addressing Russian and Chinese anxieties about the overflow of conflict and primarily focused on resolving border disputes and reducing military tensions. The SCO was officially established on June 15, 2001.[19] At its founding, leaders signed a declaration establishing the organisation and the "Shanghai Convention to com-

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bat terrorism, separatism, and extremism".[20] This institutional genesis broadened the regional security mandate beyond mere border issues.

The SCO institutional framework is guided by the "Shanghai Spirit".[21] This spirit outlines internal policy principles such as mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common-development. Its external policy adheres to non-alignment, non-targeting any third country, and openness. The organisation maintains a permanent secretariat in Beijing and an Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent.[22] Despite its expanding scope, which includes economic, energy, and cultural cooperation, the SCO is primarily consultative. It lacks enforcement mechanisms and remains a forum for dialogue.[23]

India began its engagement with the SCO by acquiring observer status .[24] This period enabled India to study the SCO's internal dynamics before committing to full membership. The decision to grant full membership to both India and Pakistan occurred in 2015.[25] Both countries formally acceded to the organisation at the "Astana Summit" in June 2017.[26] This expansion was partly influenced by the subtle Russia-China competition for influence in Central Asia. Upon joining, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated a commitment to deepening India's association with the SCO.[27] This commitment specifically focused on economic, connectivity and counter-terrorism cooperation. India's full membership is perceived as enhancing its regional visibility while preserving its freedom to pursue independent foreign policy goals. This aligns with India broader objective of strategic autonomy.

India in the SCO: Strategic Autonomy

As India involvement in this Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reflects its assertion on strategic autonomy. This principle allows India to maintain flexible decision-making and maximise its diplomatic flexibility in global policy.[28] It enables India to act as an independent entity, championing sovereignty and opposing terrorism without becoming entrench in rigid alliances. India multi-alignment strategy is evident in its engagement with various global groupings.[29] This strategy signified its commitment to shaping global governance while also safeguarding its national interests.Within the SCO, India diplomatic behaviour shows a shift from symbolic participation to assertive, issue-based diplomacy.

India consistently pursues an independent policy within the SCO. This is driven by its national interests rather than being "co-opted into another power's agenda"as noted by Chandra. This independence is clear in India's challenge to narratives put forth by dominant powers like China and Pakistan. For example, India has consistently refused to endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has also rejected equivocation on terrorism, firmly emphasising the importance of sovereignty. India uses the SCO as a platform for "issue-based diplomacy".[30] Here, its actions and diplomatic decisions are guided by a vision for shared growth rather than geopolitical rivalries.

Within the SCO, India engages in a sophisticated balancing act concerning its relationships with Russia, China, and Western powers. India involvement with China, Russia and Central Asian states in the SCO is a strategic move. It aims is to prevent rival powers from dominating the Eurasian landscape. India acknowledges the inherent structural distrust with Beijing due to border disputes and China's support for Pakistan.[31] It also notes Russia's increasing reliance on Beijing. This limits Russia's capacity to act as a regional balancer. India multi-alignment approach allows it to engage with BRICS for economic cooperation with China and Russia.[32] Simultaneously, its partnership with the U.S., Japan, and Australia in the Quad for Indo-Pacific security.

India's participation in the SCO's security frameworks is characterised by selective cooperation and a cautious approach. India has actively used the SCO platform to highlight Pakistan's role in cross-border terrorism. It emphasises that a unified stance against terrorism requires addressing all forms of sponsorship. India assume the directorship of the "Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure" in October 2021.[33] This also allowed it to diversify the agenda by focusing on contemporary challenges. These include cyber terrorism, ransomware and digital forensics. However, India has largely refrains from participating in most SCO military exercises. It perceives limited direct benefits and views these exercises as primarily serving Chinese and Russian security imperatives.[34]

Afghanistan remain a critical security concern for India. Its involvement in the SCO ensures its voice is included in discussions on peace, reconstruction and the counter-extremism policies in the region. India beliefs its engagement with the SCO as a crucial channel to address its anxieties regarding Afghanistan.[35] It often seeks close cooperation with Russia on this matter. Yet, the effectiveness of a unified SCO policy on Afghanistan is limited by internal divergences.These particularly concern how to deal with the Taliban.

India has consistently refused to endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative within the SCO framework. This principled opposition is embedded in the sovereignty concerns. Specifically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor "traverses Pakistan-occupied Kashmir", a disputed territory.[36] India's non-endorsement has led to diplomatic friction and, at times, isolation on developmental agendas within the SCO. Other members have aligned with China on this issue. India advocates for alternative connectivity models. These include the International North-South Transport Corridor (INST) and the development of Chabahar Port. It emphasises inclusivity, sustainability, transparency, and respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Energy security is a significant interest for India within the SCO. This is due to the energy-rich Central Asian republics and Russia's substantial energy resources. India joined the 'SCO Energy Club' in 2007.[37] This aimed to foster cooperation between energy producers and consumers. India's "Connect Central Asia Policy" drives its long-term quest for energy.[38] It focuses on pipeline and infrastructural development to diversify energy supplies for Eurasian countries While initiatives like the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India pipeline have faced challenges, India continues to prioritise projects like the INSTC.[39] It also views the INSTC as a means to promote trade and energy connectivity with Central Asian states and acting as a "strategic alternative to China's BRI".[40]

Challenges and Opportunities

The strategic autonomy of India within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is consist of both significant challenges and emerging opportunities. One of primary challenges for India is China's growing dominance within the SCO. China has been observed to fill the strategic vacuum in the region, promoting its Belt and Road Initiative as a "geopolitical instrument". India has consistently refused to endorse the BRI and citing concerns over sovereignty particularly as parts of the initiative pass through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.[41] This principled opposition has resulted in diplomatic friction and at times, India's diplomatic isolation on several developmental agendas. The ongoing border standoff with unresolved friction points in Depsang and Demchok, further highlights the most immediate test at the SCO for India's relationship with China.[42] China strong strategic ties with Pakistan also pose implications for India's position in South Asia and Central Asia.

Despite these challenges, opportunities arise for India to strengthen regional connectivity and trade. India is actively using the SCO to promote connectivity projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar Port in Iran. Hence, these initiatives offer an alternative to China's BRI, securing India's strategic autonomy and secure access to Central Asia without passing through Pakistan.[43] The INSTC is regarded by India as a viable alternative to China's BRI, with the potential to become a "prosperity enabler" for robust trade between India and Central Asian states.[44]

The evolving Russia-China partnership presents another challenge. Moscow's increasing dependence on Beijing limits the scope for Russia to act as a balancer in Asia. Historical tensions exist regarding the priority direction of the SCO activities between Russia and China. While Russia initially desired India to counterbalance China due to its own concerns about China's economic influence, China viewed India's membership as a way to entangle India in a regional grouping.[45] This could either encourage India to avoid anti-China alliances or isolate India by castigating its proximity to extra-regional powers.

Pakistan membership in the SCO creates significant security dilemmas for India. Pakistan's role in "obstructing India's initiatives within the SCO" is a concern. It continues to undermine consensus on terror-related issues and promotes anti-India rhetoric. An example is the omission of the Pahalgam terror attack from a joint communique, leading to India's withdrawal from the declaration.[46] The geopolitical environment of the SCO became very dynamic with the inclusion of Indo-Pak rivalries as well as Indo-China conflicts. The SCO has often avoided confronting Pakistan role in cross-border terrorism with Islamabad being "shielded by China".[47]

However, opportunities exist for counterterrorism cooperation and regional security. Counter-terrorism remains a top priority for India due to challenges from cross-border terrorism. The SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) platform offers intelligence-sharing opportunities and operational collaboration to curb

terrorism.[48] India has consistently used this platform to foreground terrorism as a transnational threat. By assuming the directorship of RATS, India could diversify the RATS agenda by focusing on issues such as cyber terrorism, ransomware, and digital forensics. The limitations of SCO's institutional mechanisms also challenge India's strategic autonomy. The "consensus-based decision-making model" can lead to deadlock, especially when bilateral disputes interfere.[49] For instance, India 2023 proposal to make English an official SCO language was blocked, despite support from several member states.[50] Ideological differences further complicate India's position, as India's democratic ethos and pluralistic diplomacy often stand in contrast to the SCO's dominant narratives. These divergences create natural limits to how far India can align with SCO decisions. The SCO functions as a forum for dialogue rather than directive action which while limiting enforcement, also allows India to maintain policy independence. Despite these limitations, India finds opportunities to shape norms and enhance multipolarity. India active participation is essential for ensuring a multipolar, inclusive and rules-based global system that reflects the interests of the Global South.[51] India challenges narratives pushed by the dominant powers and projects itself as responsible and the capable regional actors in the global world. India aims to transforms the SCO into a platform for inclusive Eurasian prosperity. India is also diversifying the SCO agenda through forums on innovation, startups, and sustainability, pushing the SCO beyond traditional geopolitical issues.

A key opportunity for India lies in energy diplomacy and access to Central Asian resources. India's strategic energy interests are significantly bolstered by its access to the Central Asian republics, which possess vast reserves of fossil fuels. India's long-term quest for energy under the aegis of "Connect Central Asia Policy" is supported by its SCO engagement.[52] India's inclusion is likely to enhance cooperation in energy and trade. India became a part of the "SCO Energy Club" established in 2007 to foster cooperation between energy producers and consumers.[53]

Conclusion

India experience within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation demonstrates that strategic autonomy in the 21st century is not about isolation, neutrality or rigid non-alignment but about engaging with complexity while retaining freedom of choice. Rather than withdrawing from contested multilateral spaces, India has chosen to participate actively using the SCO as a platform to secure diplomatic visibility, expand regional connectivity, promote counterterrorism cooperation and the access energy resources. This approach reveals that the strategic autonomy today is both defensive and proactive: it protects sovereignty while simultaneously building influence. At the same time, India faces structural challenges within the SCO due to China increasing dominance, Pakistan obstructionist behaviour, and the shifting dynamics of the Russia- China partnership. Institutional constraints, ideological differences and the consensus-based decision-making further limits India ability to shape outcomes directly. However, these challenges have not diminished India's agency. Instead, India has adopted a calibrated strategy means cooperation where interests align, resisting where sovereignty is threatened and innovating to broaden the agenda of the organisation.

Most importantly, India has used the SCO to redefine the meaning of autonomy in multilateral settings. By introducing the new priorities such as connectivity, startups, sustainability, technology and inclusive development, India is slowly transforming the SCO from a geopolitical arena into a platform for regional prosperity. In doing so, India positions itself not as a passive participant but as a normative shaper and responsible actor in global system. Ultimately, India trajectory within the SCO proves that the strategic autonomy is not about the absence of engagement but the ability to influence without dependence. It is the art of balancing power, protecting interests and shaping institutions while, also preserving freedom of action. As the global order becomes increasingly multipolar, India's delicate and assertive approach to the SCO reflects a broader vision to emerge not only as a regional balancer but also as a leading voice in constructing a more inclusive, rules-based and strategically stable Eurasian order.

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"DECODING THE 18th LOK SABHA ELECTIONS 2024 IN INDIA: FROM NORTH EAST STATES PERSPECTIVES"

T. Sadashivam
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The year 2024 marked the largest election in the world, held in India- the largest democracy. The country's electoral process was characterized by its adherence to principles of freedom, fairness, peace, participation, and transparency, culminating in a smooth transfer of power. India's diversity, spanning geographical, religious, linguistic, and cultural dimensions, poses a unique challenge when conducting elections. Despite these challenges, the democratic exercise in India remains a testament to its vibrant democracy. One region that holds significant importance in national politics, regardless of having a comparatively lower number of Lok Sabha seats, is the North East region. Comprising eight states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim, Tripura, and Nagaland - this region contributes a total of 25 Parliamentary seats to the national electoral landscape. Therefore, this article aims to look into the outcomes and dynamics of the 18th Lok Sabha elections in the North East States of India, analyzing the electoral trends, shifts in power dynamics, and the impact of regional and national parties in shaping the political landscape of the region.

Key Words: Lok Sabha Elections, Parliamentary Seat, North East States, Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress.

Introduction: The successful conduct of General elections for the 18th Lok Sabha, (the Lower House of the Indian Parliament), by the Election Commission of India (ECI), highlights the democratic essence of the world's largest democracy. Empowered by Article 324 of the Indian Constitution, the ECI is entrusted with the constitutional mandate to ensure free, fair, peaceful, participative, and transparent elections in the country. The Indian political system stands out for its uniqueness as a multi-party democracy, showcasing a diverse array of political ideologies and voices. As of March 5, 2024, India boasts a total of 2798 political parties. This includes Six (6) recognized National parties, 58 recognized State political parties, and numerous unrecognised political entities.[1] The presence of a multitude of political parties in India's electoral landscape underscores the rich tapestry of democratic engagement and pluralism in the country. Each party, whether at the national or state level, contributes to the vibrant political discourse and represents diverse interests and perspectives of the Indian populace. The 18th Lok Sabha elections saw the largest electorate registered for a vote in the world with 96.88 crores, out of which Male voters are 49.72 crores, Female voters 47.15 crores, and the Third Gender voters 48,044. In the 17th Lok Sabha elections, the total electorate was 89.6 crores, out of which 46.47 crores; 43.13 crores, and 39,683 were Male, Female, and Third Gender voters respectively. So, there has been an (8%) increase in overall registered voters from 2019 to 2024 general elections. The female voters saw an increase of over 4 crores than the male voters which is over 3 crores. The elector gender ratio has also been increased from 928 in 2019 to 948 in 2024. Also, the young electorate under (the 18-19 age group) saw an increase from (1.5 crores in 2019 to 1.85 crores in 2024). The young voters represent (1.89%) of the total voters in the country.[2] The ECI has conducted General elections to the 18th Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Telangana, and Sikkim simultaneously. The elections to the Lok Sabha seats in 36 States/Union Territories were held under the Delimitation of Parliamentary Constituencies Order 2008 except for the states of Assam and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. For the former, the elections were held as per the Delimitation of Parliamentary Constituencies in 2023, and the latter as per Delimitation Commission Order 2022.[3]

The 2024 Lok Sabha Elections in India have brought again the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance government into power for the third straight term under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a total seats of 293, while India Alliance led by Indian National Congress (INC) got 233 seats, the remaining 17 seats bagged by others.

Manifesto of Two Major National Political Parties in India: In the 18th Lok Sabha elections, the two main camps which were fighting the election for forming the government at the centre, led by the two major national political parties, namely, the BJP and the INC.

1. The Indian National Congress Manifesto: The INC manifesto for the 2024 General Elections which is titled '*NYAY Patra*' had a separate chapter on North East states of India, unlike the BJP manifesto which has no separate chapter on North East. The INC manifesto talks about the following things:[4]

i. More funds for building infrastructure in the North East States.

ii. Support for increasing border trade (both in volume and value).

iii. The Autonomous District Council in the North East States will be revived and more financial assistance to be given to it, to carry out various developmental activities.

iv. Tea garden workers to get as per the law fair wages and other entitlements.

v. A Reconciliation Commission will be appointed to reach a political and administrative settlement between the communities in Manipur that is satisfactory to all. Also, compensation will be given to victims and survivors of the Manipur conflict.

vi. Based on the preliminary agreement between the Government of India and Naga Groups agreed in 2013-14, a final solution and agreement will be made

2. Bharatiya Janata Party Manifesto: The BJP in its manifesto for the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections which is titled '*Modi Ki Guarantee*' talks about the last 10 years of Modi government initiatives 'Good Governance and Vikas' for the country, highlighting the achievements for the North East Region (NER) of India. The manifesto mentioned firstly, a reduction in insurgency-related violence by (71%) because of which the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been lifted from many parts of North East India. Secondly, improvement in connectivity of the North East states by building and expanding roads, railways, ports, etc.[5] The BJP promised in its 2024 manifesto that, if it comes to power it will:[6]

i. Implement Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) to give citizenship to all eligible individuals.

ii. Developing Adventure Tourism in the North East.

iii. To achieve balanced regional development, the BJP promises (a) to maintain peace in the North East and lift AFSA in a phased manner; (b) the Inter-State border disputes among the North East states will be resolved through continuous efforts; (c) building big reservoirs so not only helpful in managing floods but also, the water can be used for irrigation, etc; (d) North East will be developed by providing good connectivity, health, education, economic development, etc. So that, it can act as a strategic gateway for India's Act East Policy.

Analysis of Lok Sabha Elections 2024 of the North East States of India: In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the election phases (total 7) varied across different states in the North East region. The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim underwent a single phase of voting, whereas Manipur and Tripura witnessed a two-phase election. Notably, Assam stood out with three distinct phases of elections. These varying election phases across the North East states highlight the diverse electoral dynamics and logistical considerations that shape the conduct of Lok Sabha elections in the region.

1. Assam: Assam, the most populous state in the North East region, boasts the highest number of 14 Lok Sabha seats, making it a significant player in the national political arena. In the 18th General elections, the BJP contested 11 seats and emerged victorious in Nine(9), showcasing its strong electoral performance. Its allies, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United Peoples Party Liberal (UPPL) contested Two (2) and One (1) seat respectively, with AGP and UPPL securing One(1) seat each. However, the INC faced challenges despite contesting 13 seats more than the BJP, managing to win only Three(3) seats. Furthermore, its ally, Assam Jatiya Parishad (the new political party), lost the single seat it contested. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections in Assam witnessed a notable victory for the BJP, securing Nine (9) seats, while the INC managed to win Three (3) seats. Additionally, One(1) seat each was clinched by the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and an Independent candidate. The overall vote share for both National Parties saw an increase, with the BJP rising from (36.41%) in 2019 to (43%) in 2024, and the INC from (35.79%) to (37.48%). Despite the narrow vote share difference of (5.52%) between the two parties, the BJP excelled in converting votes into seats, showcasing its electoral prowess. Other regional parties like the Bodoland Peoples Front (BOPF) and UPPL experienced marginal increases in their vote share. The BOPF saw an increase from (2.50% to 3.86%), while the UPPL's

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vote share rose from (2.33% to 2.43%). In contrast, vote share of major parties AGP and AIUDF, which remained more or less the same in 2019 at (8.31%) for the former and (7.87%) latter respectively, declined in the 2024 election. AIUDF notably saw a significant decrease to (3.13%), while AGP's vote share reduced to (6.46%), reflecting the evolving political landscape in Assam.

There are some Parliamentary seats in Assam where the contest was very interesting. One such constituency was the Dhubri Parliamentary seat, the main fight was between Rakibul Hussain of INC with Muhammed Badruddin Ajmal of AIUDF, the former emerged as the winner by getting a vote share of (59.99%), while the latter got (18.72%). In this constituency, the third candidate Zabed Islam from AGP got (17.88%), and he is not far away from the AIUDF candidate. Also, in the realm of politics, the presence of Independent candidates can significantly sway election outcomes. Such instances unfolded in Assam, firstly, in the Karimganj constituency, where a fierce battle ensued between key contenders. The BJP candidate, Kripanath Mallah, managed to secure a notable vote share of (47.53%), catapulting him to victory. His closest competitor, Hafiz Rashid Ahmed Choudhury from the INC, trailed behind with a vote share of (45.93%). The margin between the two candidates stood at 18360 votes, underscoring the pivotal role played by Independent candidates in altering the electoral landscape. A total of 18 Independent candidates contested from this constituency, which is the highest number amongst any constituency in Assam, and received a total of 36,901 votes- twice the margin of defeat. Similarly, in the Kokrajhar constituency, the electoral battle unfolded between two prominent regional parties. Joyanta Basumatary of UPPL emerged victorious with a commendable vote share of (39.39%), securing a decisive victory over Kampa Borgoyari from BOPF, who obtained (35.23)% of the votes and lost by a margin of 51,583 votes. The presence of Six(6) Independent candidates in this constituency further underscored the varied choices available to voters, with these candidates collectively amassing 61,801 votes, and also, the significant support for the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option, receiving 13,912 votes. The positioning of NOTA in Parliamentary constituencies like Guwahati and Jorhat in the third position, and in Lakhimpur, Nagaon, and Silchar in the fourth position, signifies the diverse range of opinions and preferences expressed by voters.

Furthermore, the dominance of the BJP and its ally UPPL in securing all reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes (ST) which is Two (2); and One (1) Scheduled Castes (SC) in the 2024 General elections. In Assam, the existing Five Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), comprising (2 from BJP and 1 each from AGP, UPPL, and INC), participated in and emerged victorious in the 2024 election. Consequently, By-Polls are scheduled to take place in the following six months for the Five Assembly seats, namely Dholai, Behali, Bongaigaon, Sidli, and Samaguri.

2. Arunachal Pradesh: In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the elections for both State Legislative Assembly (60 seats) and Lok Sabha (2 seats), were held simultaneously in the first phase of the 2024 elections. In both Lok Sabha seats (Arunachal East and Arunachal West), BJP won with a vote share of (45.01%) and (51.38%) for the former and latter respectively. In both seats, the main contest was with INC which received a vote share of (35.6%) and (26.18%) respectively. Overall, the BJP vote share in Arunachal Pradesh was (48.87%) which was a decline from (58.89%) in 2019 Lok Sabha elections. However, the INC witnessed a significant surge in vote share, climbing from (20.92%) in 2019 to (30.37%) in 2024. Notably, other parties such as Janata Dal (Secular) and National Peoples Party (NPEP), which held a vote share of (9.28%) and (4.20%) respectively in the previous 2019 Lok Sabha elections, opted out of the 2024 race. This decision stemmed from their alliance with the BJP at the national level. In a surprising turn of events, the 2024 Arunachal Pradesh State Legislative Assembly elections showcased a stark contrast. The BJP emerged as the dominant force, securing victory in 10 seats uncontested. Notably, this included the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu, who triumphed from the Mukto Assembly constituency without a single vote being cast. The BJP won a total of 46 out of 60 Assembly seats in Arunachal Pradesh with a vote share of (54.57%) followed by NPEP which contested 18 seats and won Five (5) seats with a vote share of (16.11%); the National Congress Party contested from 18 seats, won Three (3) seats (10.43%) vote share; People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) contested in 10 seats, won Two (2) seats (7.24%) vote share; Independent candidates contested from 13 seats, won from Three (3) seats (5.26%) vote share and lastly, INC contested from 19 seats with success only from One (1) Assembly seat of Bameng constituency with a vote share of (5.26%). Out of the 50 Assembly constituencies contested in Arunachal Pradesh, only 19 witnessed multi-cornered contests. In these, the BJP secured victories in 13 seats, while coming in second position in the remaining Six (6) seats. Interestingly, the NPEP clinched victory in Five (5) seats, all of which were head-to-head battles with the BJP without any other candidates in the fray. During the Assembly election, both the BJP and the INC fielded women candidates, deviating from the norm observed in the Lok Sabha poll. The BJP allocated four tickets to women candidates, all of whom emerged victorious, with one even winning uncontested. On the other hand, the INC presented two women candidates, both of whom unfortunately lost the elections. Furthermore, Arunachal Pradesh stands out as one of the Five states/union territories in India, where the BJP secured all the Lok Sabha seats. This achievement is shared with Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, underscoring the party's strong presence and performance in these regions.

3. Sikkim: In Sikkim's political realm, the two state parties i.e., Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) and Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) are the major players in the election. The 2024 General elections saw the SKM securing victory with a vote share of (42.52%), a drop from (47.76%) in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, where they also clinched the sole Sikkim seat. Notably, a fresh entrant, the Citizen Action Party-Sikkim, emerged in 2024, claiming the second spot with a vote share of (21.71%). Conversely, the SDF witnessed a significant decrease in vote share, plummeting from (44.20%) in 2019 to (20.46%) in 2024, hinting at a clear shift of votes towards the Citizen Action Party-Sikkim. In this political landscape, the national parties, BJP and INC, play peripheral roles, with the INC trailing behind NOTA by a mere (0.59%) vote share in 2024, compared to NOTA's (0.66%). The BJP experienced a marginal rise in vote share, increasing from (4.74%) in 2019 to (5.09%) in 2024. This data underlines the minor influence of national parties in Sikkim's electoral dynamics, dominated by the SDF, SKM, and the emerging Citizen Action Party-Sikkim.

In 2024, Sikkim witnessed concurrent Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections. The state witnessed a singular bi-polar contest between the SKM and SDF, while multi-cornered battles unfolded in other constituencies. The BJP contested in 31 seats, Citizen Action Party-Sikkim in 30, INC in 12, Sikkim Republican Party in One(1), and Independent candidates in Seven(7) seats respectively. During the Assembly elections, the SKM triumphed in 31 out of 32 seats, commanding a substantial vote share of (58.38%). Conversely, the SDF managed to secure only One(1) seat, capturing a vote share of (27.37%). The Assembly election results showcased a notable increase in both the SKM and SDF's vote shares, surpassing (15%) and (7%) for the former and latter respectively in comparison to the Lok Sabha elections. The national parties, BJP and INC, obtained vote shares of (5.18%) and (0.32%) respectively. The INC's position appeared feeble, evident from the stark contrast with NOTA, which garnered 3813 (0.99%) of the votes, surpassing the INC's count by 1228 votes. This data highlights the challenging position of the INC in Sikkim's political landscape.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Sikkim, Beena Rai stood as the sole woman Independent candidate. She garnered a vote tally of only 1125 votes less than the NOTA count of 2527. Interestingly, no National or State parties nominated women candidates for the Lok Sabha elections. However, the scenario shifted in the Assembly elections, with a total of 13 women candidates participating. These candidates represented various parties, including SKM (4), INC (4), BJP (2), Citizen Action Party-Sikkim (2), and Sikkim Republican Party (1). Despite the significant female representation, only Four (4) women candidates from the SKM party emerged victorious, indicating room for improvement in women's political participation in Sikkim.

4. Nagaland: In Nagaland, a lone Parliamentary seat which is reserved for candidate from the general category saw a main contest between a National Party and a State Party i.e., INC with a Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP). In this battle INC candidate, S. Supongmeren Jamir received (52.83%) of the vote share and defeated Chumben Murry of NDPP who got (46.13%). In the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, this seat was won by NDPP in a close fight with a vote share of (49.83%) defeating INC (48.20%), whereas the NPEP received (1.49%) vote share. However, in the 2024 election, the INC vote share increased by (4.56%) in comparison with the 2019 election which includes (3.59%) decline in the vote share of NDPP and (1.49%) vote share of NPEP divided between INC and Independent candidate. The NPEP did not contest in the 2024 Lok Sabha poll.

Just two months before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Nagaland held its Assembly election in February 2024. The NDPP secured 25 seats, becoming the largest party in the 60-member Assembly. Forming a government with significant support from the BJP, which won 12 seats, the NDPP-led eight-party alliance established the Peoples Democratic Alliance (PDA). Surprisingly, the INC contested 23 seats without any success, with 17 of its candidates losing their deposits, marking the highest forfeiture rate among all participants, including

Independent candidates. Remarkably, the Nagaland Assembly currently lacks opposition members. In contrast, the Lok Sabha election portrayed a different scenario, with the INC garnering significant voter support, securing a substantial increase in vote share of (49.2%) compared to the Assembly election. Additionally, the NDPP witnessed a notable (14%) rise in vote share. The voter turnout in the Nagaland Assembly election stood at (88.1%), a considerable (30%) higher than the turnout recorded in the Lok Sabha poll for the state.

5. Meghalaya: The state of Meghalaya has Two (2) Lok Sabha seats, reserved for Scheduled Tribe. In both constituencies, the two non-ruling parties in the state had won with more than (55%) of the vote share each. In the Tura constituency, INC candidate Saleng A Sangma who is the current MLA in the Meghalaya Assembly defeated the NPEP candidate and incumbent Member of Parliament Agatha K. Sangma by a margin of 1.55 lakh votes. The former received a vote share of (56.96%), while the latter (33.93%). The Tura Lok Sabha seat has been the bastion of Purno Sangma (the founder of NPEP) family since the year 1977, except from 1989-91 when it was represented by INC.[7] In the Shillong constituency, the regional party from Meghalaya which was formed in the year 2021 i.e., Voice of the People Party (VOTPP) candidate Ricky Andrew J. Syngkon defeated two heavy-weights. Firstly, the nearest rival Vincent H. Pala, a former Union Minister of INC by a margin of 3.71 lakh votes, and, secondly, a current Cabinet Minister of Meghalaya government Mazel Ampareen Lyngdoh of NPEP. The NPEP had fielded two women candidates in the 2024 Lok Sabha poll and both of them lost, although overall the party vote share had increased from (22.44%) in 2019 to (24.22%) in 2024. On the other hand, the INC and the United Democratic Party (UDP) vote share declined from (48.66%) to (34.05%) for the former and more dramatically for the latter from (19.7%) to (2.60%). The VOTPP in its debut Lok Sabha election received (33.40%) vote share. The BJP which contested the 2019 Lok Sabha poll with a vote share of (7.99%) didn't contest in the 2024 election, because of mutual understanding with its ally NPEP. Like Nagaland, the State Assembly election for Meghalaya which consists of 60 seats also held in the same month. The NPEP emerged victorious, securing 26 seats, followed by the UDP with 12 seats, INC and All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) with Five (5) seats each, the VOTPP obtained Four (4) seats, while the BJP secured Two (2) seats, etc. The NPEP formed the government with support from the BJP and other allies. Contrastingly, in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the NPEP witnessed a decline of (7.44%) in overall vote share compared to the Assembly vote share of (31.66%). Similarly, the UDP's vote share dropped by (17.1%) from the Assembly vote share of (19.70%). Conversely, the INC and VOTPP, the two winning parties in the Lok Sabha elections, experienced an upsurge in their overall vote shares. The INC saw an increase of (21.04%) from the Assembly vote share of (13.01%), while the VOTPP's vote share rose by (28.04%) from the Assembly vote share of (5.36%). Moreover, the voter turnout for the Meghalaya 2024 Assembly election stood at (87.75%), marking an (11.15%) more compared to the Lok Sabha poll.

6. Tripura: In Tripura's Two(2) Parliamentary constituencies, namely Tripura West and Tripura East, the contest primarily featured national parties. The BJP emerged victorious in both seats, securing a substantial vote share of (72.85%) in Tripura West and (68.54%) in Tripura East. Notably, the third position in both constituencies was claimed by NOTA, with a vote share of (1.21%) and (1.61%) for the former and latter respectively. Despite the BJP's victory in both seats, the party's overall vote share in the state decreased to (49.56%) in 2024 from (70.72%) in 2019. Interestingly, the INC witnessed a notable increase in vote share, rising to (25.61%) from (11.49%) and contested solely from Tripura West. The CPI(M), historically dominant in Tripura, saw its vote share increase to (17.50%) from (12.44%), contesting only from Tripura East. The CPI(M) had ruled Tripura for several years but was ousted from power in 2018 when the BJP formed the government for the first time and again came to power in 2023.

In the 2024 Assembly election, the BJP secured 32 seats in the 60-member house, with a total vote share of (38.97%). Comparatively, in the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP's vote share surged by (31.75%) from the Assembly election. The INC, winning only Three (3) Assembly seats, experienced a modest (2.93%) increase in vote share. Conversely, the CPI(M), the primary opposition party with 11 Assembly seats, saw a decline of (12.18%) in vote share in the Lok Sabha polls compared to the Assembly election. Tripura witnessed a high voter turnout of (89.83%) in the Assembly election, surpassing the (80.93%) turnout in the Lok Sabha poll.

7. Mizoram: In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Mizoram, Richard Vanlalhmangaiha from the ruling party, Zoram Peoples Movement (ZPM), clinched victory with a notable vote share of (42.45%). His closest contender, K. Vanlalvena from the Mizo National Front (MNF), secured (28.55%) of the votes. The two prominent national parties, the BJP and the INC, secured (6.78%) and (20.08%) of the total vote share, respectively, reflecting their distinct levels of electoral support and influence among voters. Rita Malsawmi, the sole female candidate from Mizoram Peoples Conference, obtained a vote share of (0.77%), lower than an Independent candidate with (0.96%). Comparatively, the BJP's vote share increased by (1%) in 2024, while MNF's vote share decreased by (16.45%), transferring to INC in the 2024 poll. The Mizoram State Legislative Assembly election, conducted five months before the 18th Lok Sabha elections in November 2023, mirrored the voter sentiment for the latter. In the 2023 Assembly election, ZPM secured victory in 27 out of 40 seats with a total vote share of (37.87%), subsequently forming the government. In the 2024 Lok Sabha poll, ZPM witnessed a (4.52%) increase in vote share compared to the Assembly election. Similarly, the BJP's vote share rose by (1.72%), while the INC's vote share remained consistent across both Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. On the other hand, MNF experienced a decline of (6.45%) in 2024. Furthermore, the voter turnout in the 2023 Assembly election surpassed that of the Lok Sabha election by (25.39%) in Mizoram, highlighting the active participation and engagement of voters in state-level elections.

8. Manipur: The state of Manipur which has been facing an ethnic conflict since last year (2023) has impacted the 2024 Lok Sabha poll in the Two(2) Parliamentary constituencies. The Inner Manipur constituency saw the contest between the two National parties i.e., INC and BJP, where interestingly the former won with a vote share of (46.93%) while the latter got (33.16%), so the Meitei community dominated Imphal Valley rejected the BJP. In an Outer Manipur constituency which is a tribal-dominated hills, the fight was between INC and Naga Peoples Front (NPF) an ally of BJP, here also the former emerged as a winner with a vote share of (48.32%) whereas the loser got (37.76%). Overall, in Manipur, the vote share of INC in comparison with the 2019 Lok Sabha poll has increased from (24.71%) to (47.59%), on the other hand, the BJP vote share decreased from (34.32%) to (16.58%), and NPF from (22.55%) to (18.87%).

In the North East region of India, a total of Eight (8) Members of Parliament (MPs) were re-elected in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Among these re-elected MPs, Five (5) are from the state of Assam, with Three (3) belonging to the BJP and Two (2) from the INC. Despite the Delimitation of Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies in 2023 in Assam, three candidates managed to secure re-election. Firstly, Gaurav Gogoi from the INC, who originally won from the Kaliabor constituency in 2019, contested and won from the Jorhat constituency in 2024. Secondly, Pradut Bordoloi, also from the INC, who emerged victorious in 2019 from the Nawgong constituency, secured re-election from the Nagaon constituency. Lastly, the BJP candidate Dilip Saikia, who previously represented the Mangaldoi constituency in 2019, triumphed in the 2024 elections from the Darrang-Udalguri constituency. Apart from Assam, Two(2) MPs representing the BJP, Kiren Rijiju and Tapir Gao from Arunachal Pradesh, and the lone MP from Sikkim, Indra Hang Subba, who won under the SKM party, were also re-elected in the 2024 Lok Sabha poll.[8]

Women Candidates Performance in the North East States of India: The 18th Lok Sabha elections 2024, is the first election after the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill 2023 by the Parliament of India on September 2023 (it is not been implemented yet), however, it presents a sorry state of affairs with a total of only 74 women candidates elected, which is (13.6%) of the total (543) elected members of the Lok Sabha. Out of 74 women candidates, the largest number of women-winning candidates are from BJP (32), followed by INC (13), AITC (11), Samajwadi Party (5), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (3), etc. In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, a total of 59 women candidates were elected followed by 62 in 2014 and 77 in 2019.

A total of 19 women candidates contested the election from the North East Region(NER) in the 2024 Lok Sabha poll, out of which only Two (2) candidates won and both were from BJP(one each from Tripura and Assam). In Tripura East Parliamentary constituency, which is reserved for Schedule Tribe, the BJP candidate Kriti Devi Debbarman defeated Rajendra Reang of the Communist Party of India(Marxists) with a margin of (4.86 lakhs) votes. The former received a vote share of (68.54%), while the latter got (25.62%). Similarly, Guwahati Parliamentary constituency from the state of Assam, Bijuli Kaliat Medhi, a BJP candidate defeated the nearest rival female candidate Mira Borthakur Goswami from INC by a margin of (2.51 lakhs) votes. The former received a vote share of (55.95%), whereas the latter got (40.25%). In both constituencies, NOTA stands at the third position with (1.61%) vote share in the Tripura East Parliamentary

constituency and (1.27%) in the Guwahati Parliamentary constituency. Women candidates across the NER received a total of 35.78 lakh votes, the highest being in Assam with 23.39 lakh votes, followed by Tripura 7.88 lakh votes, Meghalaya 4.15 lakh votes, Arunachal Pradesh 30,530 votes, Mizoram 3793 votes and Sikkim 1125 votes. In the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, Three (3) women candidates won the election (one each from Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya) out of a total of 21 women contestants.

In the 2024 elections, political parties in the state of Assam put forward 12 women candidates, with Meghalaya and Tripura fielding Two candidates each. Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim each had One woman candidate. Notably, Nagaland and Manipur did not nominate any woman candidates in the 2024 election, mirroring the absence of women candidates in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll in those states. Moreover, Five women contested as Independent candidates in the Northeast region, with Three from Assam and One each from Sikkim and Tripura. The Gana Suraksha Party fielded Four women candidates –Three from Assam and One from Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, the Two from BJP- one each in Assam and Tripura; INC had Two women candidates from Assam, while NPEP from Meghalaya fielded Two candidates. Other parties that nominated One woman candidate each included Mizoram Peoples Conference in Mizoram; Voters Party International, Hindu Samaj Party, and Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) in Assam. In contrast, the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections saw 14 women candidates from Assam, Three from Tripura, and One each from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Sikkim. In the 2024 Lok Sabha poll, an overall (65.79%) voter turnout recorded, the male voter turnout was just marginally ahead by (0.02%), it was (65.80%) while female voter turnout was (65.78%) In the NER, the state of Assam witnessed the highest female voter turnout in comparison with male (81.71% vs 81.42%) followed by Arunachal Pradesh (79.67% vs 75.62%), Meghalaya (78.80% vs 74.35%), Manipur (78.72% vs 77.63%), and Nagaland (57.90% vs 57.55%). In the States of Sikkim and Tripura, the female voter turnout is just marginally behind the male voter turnout with (79.84% vs 79.93%) and (80.29% vs 81.57%) for the former and latter respectively. The State of Mizoram has recorded the lowest female voter turnout not only in the NER, but also amongst all the states/union territories in India with (55.67%) and also below the national average of female voter turnout. The female voter turnout in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland was more than their respective overall state voter turnout.[9] Amongst the top 10 states/union territories in India for the highest female voter turnout, there are Four states from NER i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya. Interestingly, Assam occupied the second position, while the first position goes to Lakshadweep.

Conclusion: In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the ruling parties in Nagaland, Manipur, and Meghalaya faced setbacks, failing to secure any seats, contrasting with Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim where ruling parties emerged victorious. Assam stands out as the only state where the ruling party and its ally claimed (78.57%) of the seats, with the remaining won by the opposition party. The 2024 elections also witnessed the emergence of new regional political parties in the NER, such as Citizens Action Party-Sikkim, VOTPP, and ZPM, with the latter two parties securing their first-ever Lok Sabha seats, thus reshaping the region's political scenario. Conversely, two major regional parties faced challenges, with the AIUDF losing the Lok Sabha seat which it previously won in 2019, marking the first time since 2009 that the party doesn't have any Lok Sabha MP. Similarly, the SDM experienced a decline, losing considerable ground in the state of Sikkim. It lost continuously both the State Assembly and Lok Sabha elections held in 2019 and 2024. In North East India, the NPEP is the sole political party to achieve National Party status in 2019. However, its performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was subpar, facing losses even in its home state of Meghalaya, where it failed to secure any seats.

The voter turnout in the North East States presents a varied scenario. Mizoram and Nagaland recorded voter turnouts of (56.87%) and (57.72%) respectively, placing them among the bottom Five states/union territories in India, notably below the national average of (65.79%). In contrast, Assam and Tripura stand out with high voter turnouts, registering (81.56%) and (80.93%) respectively, ranking among the top Three states/union territories in terms of voter participation. Additionally, Sikkim with a turnout of (79.88%), Manipur (78.19%) despite ongoing ethnic conflicts, Arunachal Pradesh (77.68%), and Meghalaya (76.60%), all demonstrate significant voter engagement. Despite the challenges and complexities in the region, these states have shown commendable voter turnout figures, reflecting the commitment of the electorate to participate in the democratic process and exercise their voting rights.

The North East States, traditionally considered strongholds of the INC, have witnessed a shift in political dynamics since the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In 2019, the INC secured Four(4) seats (3 in Assam and 1 in Meghalaya) out of 25 Lok Sabha seats in the region. However, in the 2024 elections, the INC improved its performance, winning Seven (7) seats (3 in Assam, 2 in Manipur, and 1 each in Meghalaya and Nagaland). On the other hand, BJP had showed a strong presence in 2019, winning 14 seats, which slightly decreased to 13 seats in 2024 (9 in Assam and 2 each from Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh). Notably, BJP's allies NPEP in Meghalaya, NPF in Manipur, and NDPP in Nagaland did not secure any seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Only two allies from Assam, the AGP and UPPL, managed to win a seat each.[10] Despite the minor decline in BJP's seat count, the party and its allies in the North East still hold a significant presence, with (60%) or 15 seats out of a total of 25 Lok Sabha seats. This demonstrates the enduring strength of the BJP in the region, further emphasized by the majority of regional parties being part of the BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), aligning them with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the centre.

Note:- *All Elections Data for the North Eastern States are taken from the website of the Election Commission of India.*

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CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS

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In the 21st century, the world has witnessed a complex web of global and regional conflicts shaped by political rivalries, economic inequalities, ethnic divisions, religious extremism and environmental stress. In the modern era, the nature of conflict has evolved beyond traditional battlefield engagement to encompass hybrid warfare, cyber threats, proxy struggles, and asymmetrical tactics. Contemporary global and regional conflicts are often interconnected, with local disputes far reaching international consequences, in political stability, economic growth and humanitarian well-being. This paper examines prominent conflicts, analyzes their root causes, evaluates their humanitarian impacts, and discusses potential strategies for resolution. By studying cases from various regions- such as the Russia –Ukraine war, the Israel-Palestine conflicts, the Yemen crisis and the tension in the Indo- Pacific – the research aims to understand how global interdependence and regional instability react to shape the international security landscape.The paper further evaluates the humanitarian costs, including mass displacement, food insecurity, and civilian casualties, as well the economic fallout manifested in disrupted trade, inflation and energy crisis. Ultimately, it argues that sustainable peace demands and combination of inclusive democracy, preventive measures, and the strengthening of international law to address both immediate crisis and their deeper structural causes.

1. Introduction:

The evolution of warfare in 21st century has redefined how conflicts emerge, develop, and influence the global order. While the end of the Cold War in1991 was expected to enter in an era of peace and cooperative international relations, the decades since have revealed a far more complex reality .Conflicts today are no longer confined to conventional state- versus –state battles; instead, they have become multi-layered struggle that combine political, economic, technological, and ideological dimensions.

Globalization has deepened the interconnectedness of nations, making regional conflicts capable of triggering worldwide consequences. A war is in one part of global can disrupt food supply chains, trigger refugee crises, cause energy shortage, or destabilize financial markets thousands of miles away. This interconnected vulnerability is illustrated by the Russian –Ukraine war's impact on the global grain export, the Israel- Palestine conflict's effects on Middle Eastern stability, and tension in the Indo- Pacific threatening vital maritime trade routes.

Contemporary conflicts are also marked by the rise of non-state actors- militias, insurgent groups, alongside traditional armies. Hybrid warfare strategies now blend military offensive with cyber- attacks, misinformation campaigns, and economic coercion, complicating both detection and resolution.

2. Defining Contemporary Conflicts:

Contemporary conflicts refers to armed confrontations, disputes, and tensions occurring in the modern era- particularly from the post- Cold War period (after 1991) to the present- that are shaped by globalization, technological advancements, and changing geopolitical dynamics. Unlike traditional wars, which were primarily fought between nation-states using conventional military means, contemporary conflicts often blur the lines between war and peace, domestic and international politics, and military and non- military tactics[1].

One of the defining features of contemporary conflicts is **hybrid warfare**- a combination of conventional military operations, irregular tactics, cyber-attacks, economic coercion, and propaganda campaigns.[2] For example, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has combined traditional land warfare with cyber operations targeting infrastructures, disinformation campaigns on social media and economic sanctions from external actors.[3]

Another characteristic is the **prominence of non- state actors**. In contemporary conflicts, non- state actors- armed groups, insurgent movements, militias, terrorist organizations, and private military companies- play increasingly decisive role. Unlike national armies, these groups operate outside the direct control of recognized states, although they may sometimes receive covert or overt support from them.[4] Groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, The Houthis in Yemen, Taliban in Afghanistan and Lashkar –e Taiyyba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in Pakistan have played central roles in shaping conflict outcome. These actors may operate independently, align with state interest, or act as proxies for larger powers. Their presence complicates peace negotiations, as they are often not bound by formal diplomatic agreements or international law.

Proxy Warfare is also increasingly common. In such scenarios, regional or global powers indirectly support opposing sides in a conflict, providing arms, funding, intelligence or training. The Yemen civil war, for example is widely seen as a proxy battle between Saudi Arabia, (backing the Yemeni government) and Iran (supporting the Houthi rebels)[5]

Finally, **global interdependence** means that even conflicts confined to specific regions can have worldwide implications. It refers to a mutual reliance among nations in economic, political, security spheres etc. Modern economies are interconnected through trade, energy markets, migrations and information flows. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted how disruption in one area can cascade globally- a phenomenon that applies equally to conflicts.

In short, contemporary conflicts are complex, multi-dimensional, and global in their consequences. They require new approaches to diplomacy, security, and conflict resolution that go beyond traditional military solutions.

3. Major Contemporary Conflicts:

Contemporary conflicts are not isolated incidents confined within national borders; rather, they are dynamic crisis that often transcend geographical boundaries, drawing in regional or global powers. These conflicts are shaped by a combination of historical grievances, political rivalries, competition over resources, ethnic or religious divisions, and strategic interests.

Given the wide spectrum of ongoing disputes worldwide, it is not feasible to examine each in equal depth within a single study. Therefore this paper focuses on select cases that exemplify different dimensions of modern conflict. These examples – ranging from a large scale interstate war in Europe to enduring territorial disputes in Asia- highlight how political ambition, historical grievances and strategic resources interact to produce prolonged instability.

3.1 Russia - Ukraine Conflict:

The first and perhaps the most globally consequential of those is the **Russia - Ukraine war**, a conflict whose escalation in 2022 marked a dramatic turning point in post - Cold War international relations. This conflict originated from long-standing historical and geopolitical tensions but entered its most severe phase in February 2022; When Russia launched a full- scale invasion on Ukraine. The roots of this war can be traced back to 2014, when political upheaval in Kyiv led to ousting a pro-Russian government, prompting Russia to annex Crimea and support separatist movements in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.[6]Moscow justified its action on grounds of protecting Russian-speaking populations and resisting what it viewed as NATO's eastward expansion, while Ukraine and its allies condemned the moves as violations of international laws and nation's sovereignty.

The war represents the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II and has reshaped the continent's security architecture. NATO, which had faced questions about its relevance prior to2022, emerged reinvigorated, with member states significantly increasing defense spending and Sweden and Finland seeking membership.[7] The conflict has also tested the limits of western economic sanctions, which aimed to weaken Russia's war economy without destabilizing global market.

Apart from the fighting on the battlefield, the Russia –Ukraine war has caused a major humanitarian crisis, forcing millions of people to leave their homes, destroying schools and hospitals, and creating serious challenges for aid and relief work. By mid-2023 over eight million Ukrainian refugees had fled abroad and millions more were initially displaced.[8] The war has disrupted Ukraine's agriculture export, particularly grain, worsening food insecurity in parts of Africa and Middle East.[9]

The global economic impact of this war is that energy markets have been significantly destabilized. Europe was previously dependent on Russian natural gas, has accelerated its shift towards renewable energy and alternative suppliers. The conflict also triggered spikes in oil pipes, disrupted fertilizer exports, and

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contributed to global inflationary pressures.[10]

3.2 Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israel- Palestine conflict is one of the longest running disputes in the modern history. The origin of this conflict can be traced to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the rise of Zionist nationalism and Arab nationalism under the shadow of the Ottoman Empire and later British mandate. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the creation of the state of Israel resulted in the displacement of approximately 750000 Palestinians, an event referred to as the Nakba. The Six-Day War the of 1967 further alerted the geopolitical landscape, as Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem ,deepening Palestinian resentment and international involvement.

The latest escalation (2023-2025) has resulted in over 61000 Palestinian deaths and widespread destruction in Gaza. The United Nations Human Rights Council and various NGO's have accused both sides of violations of international humanitarian law, with calls for International Criminal Court investigations.[11]

The conflict is not merely bilateral- it is interwoven with Middle Eastern power struggle. Iran's support for group like Hezbollah and Hamas represent an asymmetric strategy in its rivalry with Israel.[12] This dynamic feeds into what analysts term the Axis of Resistance, comprising Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Palestine militant factions.

The conflict draws in major global powers in both direct and indirect ways. Historically the USA is Israel's strongest ally, providing military aid and diplomatic backing in UNSC. China positioning itself as neutral mediator, emphasizing dialogue and economic reconstruction. As far as Russia concern, it has balanced relation with Israel and Iran.

3.3 Yemen Conflicts

The Yemen conflicts, began in 2014, one of the worlds most protracted and devastating humanitarian crisis. It originated when the Houthi movement, officially known as Ansar-Allah and backed by Iran, seized control of the Yemeni capital Sana'a, forcing President Abdulla Mansur Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia. In March 2015 a Saudi led coalition- supported by the UAE and with backing from the USA and other western powers- intervened militarily to restore Hadi's internationally recognized government. Since then, Yemen has been locked in a brutal civil war that has fragmented the country between multiple parties, including southern separatist, tribal militias. Al- Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State affiliates.[13]

The UN says Yemen is experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis. It says 4.5 million people, one in seven of the population, have been displaced, while 24.1 million people, 80% of the population, are in need of humanitarian aid and protection. The UN estimated that by the start of 2022, the conflict in Yemen had caused over 377000 deaths, with 60% the result of hunger, lack of healthcare and unsafe water.[14]

3.4 Indo-Pacific Conflicts

The Indo-pacific conflict has deep historical roots in colonial-era maritime boundaries, Cold War alignment, and post-World War II territorial disputes. The Indo-Pacific region is home to several interlinked disputes that have shaped its geopolitical landscape. Foremost among them is the South China Sea maritime dispute, where China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei has overlapping claims to islands, reefs, and exclusive economic zones. The Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, and Scarborough Shoal are the primary flashpoints, with China's "Nine-Dash-Line" claim largely rejected by the Hague Tribunal ruling. The ruling invalidated China's expansive claim to the South China Sea, but Beijing refused to participate in the Philippines-initiated arbitration, rejected the decision and to defy it . In August 2024 the US, Australia, Canada and the Philippines conducted air and naval exercise in South China Sea to uphold international law and freedom of navigation. China responded with its own patrols near Scarborough Shoal. Both sides emphasized the importance of maritime of maritime rights and rules –based order amidst ongoing territorial disputes.[15]

Another major contention is the East China Sea dispute between China and Japan over Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. Beyond question of sovereignty, the stakes involve fishing rights, access to undersea energy resources, and symbolic national pride. Tension escalates periodically through Chinese coast guard incursions into water claimed Japan, prompting increased Japanese military patrols. In March, 2025 Japan has voiced over serious concerns over a prolonged incursion by Chines coast guard ships near the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, making one of the longest intrusion into Japan's territorial waters. Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya highlighted the growing escalation of Chinese vessel activity around the Senkaku Islands, stating that the situation is "clearly escalating."[16]

The Taiwan Strait remains one of the most sensitive flashpoints. Korean Peninsula conflicts, tension between India and China along with Line of Actual Control, Myanmar's border disputes, Cambodia-Thailand border dispute are other enduring challenges. Collectively, these disputes highlight the complexity of the Indo-Pacific security environment, where historical grievances, territorial ambitions and strategic rivalries converge-often in external powers and creating a persistent of escalation.

4. Root Causes Of Global And Regional Conflicts:

Global conflicts are typically rooted in a multi-layered nexus of systemic insecurity, territorial disputes, economically, disputes over resources, social inequalities, ethnic conflict, and environmental pressure etc. At the systemic level, the anarchic structure of the international order- where states lack a higher authority- forces nations into self-help behavior that pre disposes them towards violence. Economically, disputes over valuable resource such as oil, minerals, or water etc. both provoke and sustain conflicts. Simultaneously, grievances stemming from socio-political inequalities, ethnic and national conflicts deepen divides and legitimatize violent mobilization. Geopolitical rivalries and territorial ambition often catalyze violent confrontation on the global stage.

4.1 The Anarchic Structure of International System

The anarchic structure of the international system, as described in realist international relations theory, is a fundamental root cause of global conflict because it operates without a central authority to enforce rules or guarantee the security of states. In this self-help environment, nations must rely on their own capabilities and alliances for survival, often triggering security dilemmas in which one state's defensive military buildup is perceived as a threat by others, leading to arms races and escalate tension. For example the current US- China competition in the Indo-Pacific and NATO- Russia tension over Ukraine. The absence of effective enforcement mechanism for international law allows powerful states to bypass global norms, as seen in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq without UN authorization or Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Collectively these dynamics shows that in an anarchic world order, mistrust, competition, and the quest for power naturally evolve into conflicts that can rapidly escalate to a global scale.

4.2 Territorial Disputes

Territorial disputes refer to disagreement over a piece of territory claimed by two or more independent countries, occurring when at least one government disputes the existing boundary line with its neighbor, which is considered legal by the other party. These disputes can arise from historical claims, resource competition, or ethnic conflicts and often involve larger tracts of land or water.[17] Many global and regional conflicts are rooted in unresolved territorial claims, often inherited from colonial-era boundary demarcations that ignored ethnic, cultural and historical realities. Disputed territories are not just symbolic- they often carry strategic, economic and cultural significance. Examples include the South China Sea where overlapping claims by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and others involve strategic shipping lanes and potential oil reserves; and the long–standing. Israel-Palestine conflict, which intertwines land, identity, and sovereignty issues. Through an examination of 129 traditional disputes between 1950-1990, Paul Huth presents a new theoretical approach for analyzing the foreign policy behavior of states. Such disputes are often difficult to resolve because they involve national pride, identity, and perceived historical injustice.

4.3 Resource Scarcity And Global Competition

Resource scarcity is one of the most persistent drivers of global conflict, arising when the demand for vital resources – such as water, arable land, minerals, and energy resources – exceeds their available supply. This scarcity can be absolute, when resource are physically limited or relative, when unequal access creates competition .In many cases, resource scarcity is intertwined with population growth environmental degradation, and unsustainable exploitation. When essential resources become limited, competition among states, communities or groups often intensifies, particularly in regions with weak governance or existing social inequalities.[18]

One notable example is the Darfur Conflict in Sudan, where prolonged drought and desertification reduced the availability of arable land and water, intensifying tensions between nomadic herders and settled farmers, what began as local disputes escalated into larger humanitarian crisis, drawing international intervention and condemnation.[19]

Global competition for resources arises when nations, corporations, communities vie for access to essential natural resources such as oil, water, minerals, fertile land, and rare earth elements. This competition is driven by increasing population, industrialization, energy needs and technological development, often creating tension and conflict on an international scale.[20]

Energy resource is one of the most important key drivers of global resource competition. Oil, natural gas, and coal remain critical for economic growth. Countries with limited domestic energy supplies often compete for the access of foreign reserves. For example, the strategic rivalry between the United States, China and Russia over oil and gas resources in Central Asia and the Arctic region has implications for global geopolitics. The global economy relied on oil for much of the 20th century as a portable and indispensable fuel. The immense wealth associated with oil generates political struggle to control it, and the history of petroleum is the history of war and struggle. West Asia specifically the Gulf region, accounts for about 30% of global oil production. But it has about 64% of the planet's known reserves and therefore the only able to satisfy any substantial rise in oil demand.[21]

Water is another crucial resource that is relevant to global politics. Regional variations and increasing scarcity of freshwater in some parts of the possibility of disagreements over shared water resources as a leading source of conflict in the 21st century. Some commentators on world politics have referred to 'water wars' to describe the possibility of violent conflict over the life sustaining resource. Examples of violence include those between Israel, Syria, and Jordan in 1950s and 1960s over attempts by each side of divert water from the Jordan and Yarmuk Rivers, and more recent threats between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq over the construction of dams on the Euphrates River.[22]

In all these cases, scarcity of critical resources has not only caused local violence but has escalated into conflicts with global repercussions, involving foreign powers, international organizations, and humanitarian interventions. This demonstrates that resource scarcity is not merely a local or economic problem but a strategic factor in shaping global security dynamics.

4.4 Ethnic and Nationalist Conflicts

Ethnic conflict refers to organized violence in which the cleavages, mobilization frames, and targets center of ethnic identity; nationalist conflict overlaps when political leader claim state power or territorial control "in the name of nation." Ethnic and nationalist movements are organized political or social mobilization on shared identity- such as language, culture, religion of a specific group.

Ethnic movements primarily focus on promoting the rights, autonomy, or recognition of an ethnic community within an existing state, often seeking protection from discriminating or greater political participation.

Nationalist Movements emphasize the idea that a "nation" (a people united by common identity or history) should have self-determination, which may mean greater autonomy, full independence, or unification with a perceived homeland.

When these movement challenge state authority, demand secession or compete with other identity-based group for power and territory, they can become root cause of conflict, especially when combined with political exclusion, state weakness, or perception of existential threat.

There are some contemporary examples of ethnic and nationalist movement which drawn global attention.

1. Myanmar-Rohingya and Army Conflict:

Since 2016, Myanmar's military crackdown on the Rohingya (a Muslim minority) in Rakhine state has resulted in genocide accusations and massive displacement. In recent years, the Rohingya continue to suffer amid escalating clashes between the military Junta and ethnic armed groups, including the Arakan Army, representing Rakhine Buddhists. Estimate suggests at least 25 adults have been died from starvation and untreated illness in 2025 due to blockade in Rakhine; nearly a million Rohingya in Bangladesh camps are suffering amid funding cuts. A UN-backed investigation revealed systematic torture, rape, and atrocities in Myanmar detention facilities, including in Rakhine, highlighting the severity of the conflict. A coordinated mission by Malaysia, Bangladesh, and regional partners was launched to deliver humanitarian aid and peace advocacy for Rohingya Refugees.

2. Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh Ethnic Conflict:

In 2023, Azerbaijan's offensive and blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh led to the mass exodus of around 150,000 ethnic Armenians from the enclave- an act widely characterized as ethnic cleansing. Though by the international recognition the territory remains part of Azerbaijan, it had been controlled by Armenian for decades. As global attention shifted to Gaza, the plight of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh has received less coverage. Recently, in August 2025, a peace agreement signed by the both country to end the 37 year long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Both the parties agreed on all terms, aiming to bring lasting peace and stability to the region.

3. Ethnic conflict in Darfur Sudan:

The long standing ethnic conflict in Darfur- from the early 2000s through today- has grown far beyond a domestic tragedy, evolving into global crisis with profound international repercussion. Initially, the Sudanese government and allied Arab-militia (notably the Janjaweed) targeted non-Arab groups like the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawas, leading to massive civilian casualties, displacement, and accusations of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Over time, Darfur's strategic location and resource wealth- including gold mining regions- attracted intervention from global and regional powers. Entities such as the UAE, Russia, Iran, Egypt, Libya and Chad have backed opposing sides to advance their geopolitical and access key assets. Meanwhile, the fallout has become globally consequential – triggering one of the largest humanitarian catastrophes in modern memory. In December 2024 the International Rescue Committee declared the situation in Sudan to be the largest humanitarian crisis ever recorded, as being the largest displacement crisis in the world, with an estimated 11.4 million people displaced within Sudan and more than 3 million people displaced outside of the country.[23] The Russia-Ukraine conflict has added a geostrategic dimension to the region. Russia is keen to have a naval base in Sudan to host 300 troops and berth four ships. Dampening the Russian efforts is the US, which is exerting influence, not allowing it to happen, thus bringing the superpower rivalry again to the region.[24]

4.4 Climate Change and Environmental Stress

Climate change and environmental stress are increasingly recognized as a root cause and conflict multipliers in global conflicts because they disrupts natural resource availability, destabilize livelihoods and intensify competition among communities and nations. For example, the prolonged drought in Syria – exacerbated by climate change – played a substantial role in destabilizing rural livelihoods and fueling social unrest that contributed to the outbreak of civil war. Similarly, in the Sahel region (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad), desertification and erratic rainfall have reduced arable land and water supplies, intensifying farmer-herder clashes and enabling armed extremist recruitment, with ripple effect reaching Europe through migration crisis and prompting intervention by powers like France and Russia.[25]In the Nile river basin, Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, amid worsening drought, threatens water security for, Egypt and Sudan, drawing in the African Union, the Arab League, and US mediation, underscoring the global diplomatic stakes. Meanwhile, in the Pacific, rising seas are forcing nation like Fiji to relocate entire coastal village, altering Exclusive Economic Zone boundaries and heightening maritime disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, with implications of international law and security. Collectively, these cases illustrate how environmental stress transforms local climate challenges into security crisis with far reaching global consequences.

In conclusion, global conflicts emerge from a wide range of interlinked causes. The diversity and complexity of these drives make it impossible to present an exhaustive list, as each conflict is shaped by its own unique combination of historical, social and geopolitical factors. What is clear, however, is that these causes rarely operate in isolation; they intertwine to escalate tension and transform local disputes into crisis with global consequences.

5. Humanitarian Consequences Of Global Conflicts

The humanitarian consequences of global conflicts are staggering, extending far beyond battlefield casualties to touch nearly aspect of civilian life. Wars not only kill on massive scale but also destroy livelihoods, displace entire populations,

and dismantle the systems necessary for survival- food supply chains, healthcare, education, and safe shelter. In Gaza, for example, the toll of ongoing violence has risen to more than 60,000 deaths, with famine looming over the population. Recent reports confirm that at least 147 people, including 88 children, have already died from hunger related causes, highlighting the devastating interplay between armed conflict and humanitarian collapse.[26] The destruction of hospitals, water treatment plants, and sanitation facilities has further deepened civilian vulnerability, making recovery nearly impossible without sustained international intervention.

The situation in Sudan illustrates how protected conflicts can cause widespread humanitarian collapse. Since fighting broke out between rival military factions, approximately 150,000 people have been killed, 12 million have been displaced internally, and nearly 4 million have fled to neighboring countries. The war has crippled Sudan's healthcare system, left millions without access to clean water, and triggered famine conditions in multiple regions. Women and children are disproportionately affected, with reports of sexual violence being used systematically as a tactic of war.[27]

On a broader scale, United Nations data underscores the worsening humanitarian toll of armed conflicts worldwide. In 2024 alone, there was a 25% increase in conflict-related sexual violence, with 4600 documented survivors, mainly from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and South Sudan.[28]

In essence, the humanitarian cost of global conflicts is measured not only in lives lost during combat but in the destruction of the foundations that sustains civilian life. It is seen in starving children, mass displacement, the collapse of essential services, and the erosion of communities' ability to recover.

6. Dealing With Global And Regional Conflicts: Pathway To Peace:

Global and regional conflicts continue to threaten peace, security, and development in today's interconnected world. Wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan; ethnic disputes in Myanmar, Sudan and Nagorno-Karabakh; and regional tension in the Indo-Pacific highlight the complexity of modern conflicts. These disputes are rarely isolated- they often involve overlapping issues such as ethnic identity, resource competition, political power struggles, and external intervention. Dealing with such conflicts requires a multi-layered approach that combines diplomacy, governance reform, economic cooperation, and inclusive peace building.

6.1 Diplomacy and Negotiated Settlements

Diplomatic engagement is the first step toward conflict resolution. It means resolving disputes through dialogue, compromise, and agreements instead of relying on war or force. Diplomacy brings conflicting parties to the table, while negotiated settlement ensures that each side's concerns are addressed in a way that reduces violence and build trust. This method is essential for both global conflicts and regional conflicts because –

- It prevents loss of life and destruction caused by war.
- It is cheaper and less risky prolonged military action.
- It allows for long term cooperation on political, economic, or security issues.
- It gives a chance to conflicting groups to be heard, which reduces resentment.

International Organization such as the United Nations, The African Union and the European Union, and the major powers has often acted as mediators. In recent decades, diplomacy has provided frameworks for conflict management. The Minsk **Agreements (2014-2015), brokered by France and Germany** attempted to reduce fighting between Ukraine and Russian-backed forces, though imperfect, they delayed escalation for years. In Africa, the **South Sudan Peace Agreement (2018)** allowed rival leaders Salva Kirr and Riek Machar to form a unity government, reducing the scale of civil war violence.

Contemporary developments in 2025 further illustrate diplomacy's enduring importance. The **Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement (August 8, 2025)** signed in Washington resolved decades of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh and marked the first serious normalization effort between the two states. Recently, on August 15, 2025, president Trump and president Putin held high- stakes talks in Anchorage in Alaska **(Trump-Putin Summit in Alaska, 2025)** to seek a ceasefire in the Ukraine war, now entering in its fourth year. Despite no formal agreement reached, both leaders signaled potential areas for compromise- such as freezing front lines or reassessing NATO expansion- for possible future talks.[29]Together these examples demonstrate that diplomacy and negotiate settlements are the vital instruments for managing global and regional conflicts.

6.2 Economic Cooperation and Development

Conflict often worsens due to economic inequality and competition for resources. Economic cooperation and development a crucial role in transforming conflict-prone regions into zones of stability and prosperity. When societies experience poverty, unemployment, or unequal access to resources, tension easily escalates into violence. On the other hand, a shared economic project, investment in development reduces grievances and fosters shared prosperity. There are so many examples of economic cooperation such as European Coal and Steel Community (1951), which laid the foundation for today's European Union. A more recent example comes from Rwanda, where post-genocide reconstruction policies focused on rebuilding infrastructure, encouraging trade, and reducing poverty, which helped prevent the return of large scale violence (2021). Rwanda-Congo 2025 peace deal, which combined troop withdrawal with joint investment in mineral resources, illustrates how economic cooperation becomes a foundation for long-term peace.

6.3 Reconciliation and Justice

Conflicts often leave behind deep scars- mass killings, forced displacement, destroyed communities, and psychological trauma. If these grievances are not addressed, they create cycles of revenge and instability. Reconciliation and Justice are therefore essential to healing societies and preventing the preventing the return of violence. These processes focus not only on restoring dignity to victims, fostering forgiveness, and rebuilding trust between divided groups.

One widely recognized model is the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa**, established after the end of apartheid in the 1990s. Instead of focusing only on punishment, The TRC allowed victims to share their stories publicly while granting amnesty to perpetrators who confessed. This approach emphasizes truth telling and healing over retribution, which helped the country transition peacefully into democracy. More recently, in **Colombia's 2016** peace deal with FARC rebel, the government introduced a **Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)** combining reduced sentences for ex-combatants with reparation and truth telling for victims.

Thus, reconciliation and justice are not only about legal proceedings but about restoring human relationship and rebuilding social trust. Without reconciliation, peace remains fragile; without justice, victims' wounds remain open. Successful post-conflict societies show that truth-telling, accountability, and forgiveness must go hand- hand to ensure the past violence does not repeat itself.

6.4 Governance Reforms

Weak, corrupt, or exclusive governance is one of the major drivers of conflict across the world. When people feel excluded from political decision-making, discriminated against in law, or denied to justice, they are more likely to mobilize in protest or even turn to violence. Governance reform – the restructuring of political, legal, and administrative system to ensure fairness, transparency and inclusivity – therefore becomes a vital pathway to peace. For example-In the aftermath of **Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution (2011), the Quartet of civil society groups facilitated dialogue** that led to a theocratic government and ratification of a new constitution. This process earned them the Nobel Prize in 2015 for helping consolidate democratic governance.[30]

Thus, there are so many different ways through which peace can be achieved when conflicts arise, and no single method works in every situation. Some disputes are best settled through diplomacy and negotiations, in other cases, economic cooperation and development projects help reduce tension. Resource-sharing and justice agreements can prevent dispute over water, minerals, or energy from turning violent, while governance reform ensure that all communities feel represented and protected under the law. At the same time, truth reconciliation, and justice processes help societies heal from past violence and promoting forgiveness. These different approaches show that peace is not the result of one effort but a combination of strategies that address both immediate tension and deeper structural problems.

Conclusion:

Contemporary global and regional conflicts reveal that the causes of violence are complex, ranging from territorial disputes and ethnic rivalries to competition over resources, governance failure, and external interventions. These conflicts

not only destabilize regions but also create humanitarian crisis that spill across borders, affecting international peace and security. However, experiences from different parts of the world also show that conflict is not permanent – dialogue, negotiation settlements, inclusive governance, and economic cooperation can transform hostility into opportunities for coexistence. Ultimately, dealing with contemporary conflicts demands a balanced approach that combines immediate crisis management with long term structural reforms. Only by addressing both the root causes and the human costs can the global community move closer to sustainable peace and prosperity.

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CYBERCRIME AND CYBERSECURITY: ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND THE WAY FORWARD IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA–US CYBER DIPLOMACY

Vishal Rana

Cybercrime and cybersecurity have become critical issues in the India–US strategic partnership. This paper examines the current landscape of cyber threats in India, identifies and analyses the evolving diplomatic and technical cooperation between India and the US.Cybercrime in India has increased sharply - from about 26,000 cases in 2019 to more than 1.5 million in 2023 . This rising tide of cyber-attacks strains our law enforcement and legal systems, highlighting gaps in technical capacity, legal frameworks, and cross-border cooperation. In response, India and the US have institutionalised multiple dialogues and agreements, to share information, conduct joint training, and build cyber norms. This paper argues that a balanced policy approach is needed: using technical cooperation, improving legal tools, and deepening diplomatic engagement.Key policy recommendations include expanding capacity-building initiatives, streamlining legal cooperation mechanisms, and promoting a global normative framework that respects both security and civil liberties. Such measures would reinforce the India–US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership in cyberspace and help secure the shared digital ecosystem.

Keywords: Cybercrime, Cyber Security, Cyber Diplomacy, India-US Relation.

Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed economies and societies, but it has also created a vast new battleground for crime and conflict. Both India and the United States are major players in the global cyber domain: India with its rapidly digitizing economy and large internet user base, and the US as a technological powerhouse and pioneer of cybersecurity policy. Cybercrime – offenses like financial fraud, hacking, identity theft, and ransomware – has emerged as a transnational threat that undermines public trust and national security. At the same time, cybersecurity – the protection of information infrastructure – has become a strategic imperative. India and the US face many common challenges (e.g. cross-border fraud, critical infrastructure attacks, exploitation of digital finance) and thus have strong incentives to cooperate. Their engagement occurs within the broader context of strategic competition and alliances: while India seeks autonomy and partnerships across the world, the US aims to build coalitions to promote a secure, open internet and counter malicious cyber actors. This paper explores the complex interplay of technical, legal, and diplomatic dimensions in the India–US cyber partnership. It reviews how cybercrime is evolving in India, identifies gaps and bottlenecks, and assesses the current status of bilateral cooperation. Finally, it offers policy recommendations for a "way forward" to make the partnership more effective in combating cyber threats and enhancing cybersecurity resilience.

Conceptual Framework: Cybersecurity and **cybercrime** are closely related but distinct concepts. Cybersecurity refers to the measures and practices adopted to protect networks, data, and information infrastructure from unauthorized access, attacks, or damage. This includes technical defenses (firewalls, encryption, intrusion detection), organizational measures (incident response plans, risk management), and legal standards (security guidelines, liability rules). In contrast, cybercrime denotes the unlawful activities carried out through or against computer networks and digital systems. It spans a range of offenses, from financial fraud (phishing, identity theft, payment scams) to illegal content (cyber stalking, child abuse) to attacks on infrastructure (malware, distributed denial-of-service attacks). Cybercrime can be perpetrated by lone actors (script kiddies, hacktivists), organized criminal groups (fraud rings, dark-web marketplaces), or even state-backed actors engaging in espionage or sabotage. In the policy realm, cyberspace is governed by multiple frameworks. At the international level, principles like the applicability of international law to cyberspace and norms of responsible state behavior have been articulated (e.g. by the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts). Notably, the 2016 **India-US Cyber Framework** emphasized shared values such as an open, secure, interoperable internet and commitments to cooperate on cybercrime and critical infrastructure security [1]. It explicitly commits both countries to respect universal human rights online while upholding national security. India's approach to cyber statecraft is shaped by its domestic development goals and geopolitical context: it seeks to use digital technology to drive economic growth, reduce dependence on any single power and increase its own cyber resilience and capabilities. This has led India to place a strong emphasis on sovereignty and data localization in its cyber policies, sometimes diverging from Western views on encryption and privacy. Cyber diplomacy occurs at the intersection of these technical and strategic considerations. It includes bilateral and multilateral dialogues, joint exercises, information-sharing agreements, and advocacy on global internet governance. In the India–US context, cyber diplomacy is part of the "Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership" between two democracies. Both governments publicly reaffirm a vision of a *"free, open, inclusive, secure, trusted, and interoperable Internet"* [2]. However, behind this shared language lie policy tensions (for example, over encryption, data privacy, and export controls). A balanced framework for cooperation must therefore navigate these differences while focusing on mutual interests: improving law enforcement collaboration to tackle cybercrime, strengthening cyber norms against malicious state behavior, and leveraging joint R&D to secure emerging technologies.

Cybercrime Landscape: Cybercrime in India has grown exponentially over the past few years. According to the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) under the Ministry of Home Affairs, complaints filed on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (NCRP) have soared from just 26,049 in 2019 to over 1.55 million in 2023. In the first four months of 2024 alone, more than 740,000 complaints were registered (about 4 filings per minute)[3]. These figures represent a roughly seven-fold increase in total cases over four years. On average, India saw about 5,000 complaints per day in 2023 (equivalent to a cybercrime rate of 129 per 100,000 population) [4]. Even more dramatically, in May 2024 the I4C reported a daily average of 7,000 complaints, a jump of 113.7% over the 2021-23 period. Most cybercrimes in India are financially motivated. A recent study by the Future Crime Research Foundation at IIT Kanpur found that between January 2020 and June 2023, approximately 75–77% of Indian cybercrime cases involved financial fraud [5]. Nearly half of those financial frauds centered on online payment systems (UPI and internet banking). Other significant categories included scams via investment apps, gaming apps, and lending apps (which combined accounted for 38% of foreign-origin fraud cases). Social-media-related offences (impersonation, cyber-bullying, sextortion, phishing) made up about 12% of cases. Notably, relatively few crimes involved the classic "hacking" or data breaches (only about 1.6% of cases were unauthorized system access or website defacement). Ransomware, online trafficking, and cryptocurrency fraud each contributed to roughly 9% of the remaining cases.

A summary of major threat types is shown in Table 1

Type of Cybercrime	Share of Cases (%)
Financial fraud (card, UPI, banking, business email compromise, etc.)	~77
Social-media/offline platform crimes (impersonation, phishing, sextortion, etc.)	~12
Other (ransomware, crypto fraud, cyber trafficking, etc.)	~9
Hacking / system intrusions (unauthorized access, defacement, etc.)	~1.6

Table 1. Major types of reported cybercrimes in India (2020–2023) based on I4C data.

The human and economic impact of these crimes is staggering. Indians lost over ₹1,750 crore (~USD 215 million) to online fraud in just the first four months of 2024 [6]. From April 2021 through Dec 2023, total losses to cyber fraud exceeded ₹10,319 crore. Using the NCRP figures, roughly Rs. 176 crore was stolen per month on average in early 2024 [7].

Beyond direct financial loss, cybercrime undermines public confidence in digital services, and victims often face long recovery processes. To its credit, the government's financial fraud reporting system helped recover about 9–10% of stolen funds via timely interventions, but much work remains. Globally, India is no outlier: cybercrime is rising everywhere. However, India's unique factors (huge population, rapid digital penetration, varied levels of cybersecurity literacy) have created fertile ground for scammers. The Internet and mobile telephony have

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leapt ahead of public awareness and law enforcement readiness. Moreover, many of India's cyber threats originate abroad. According to I4C, roughly 40–50% of reported cases involved perpetrators outside India, notably from China, Cambodia, and Myanmar. This underscores the transnational nature of cybercrime: criminals exploit weak jurisdictions, anonymity, and cross-border finance. US agencies like the FBI and DHS report similarly dramatic trends (e.g. ransomware payments approaching billions globally), illustrating that cybercrime is a worldwide scourge. The borderless character of these crimes makes international cooperation essential.

Key Challenges: Despite increased attention, both India and the US face significant challenges in effectively combating cybercrime and enhancing cybersecurity. These challenges span technical, legal, institutional, and policy dimensions: **Technical and Capacity Constraints:** India has a severe shortage of trained cybersecurity professionals. A study by the Data Security Council of India (DSCI) estimated a need for an additional 1.5 million cyber experts by 2025 to meet industry demands [8]. Many organizations lack advanced security tools, network monitoring, and skilled staff. In practice, this leaves systems vulnerable: for example, critical infrastructure (power grids, financial systems, telecom networks) have faced notable cyber incursions. Similarly, India's law enforcement agencies have limited digital forensics and incident response capacity. The *Cyber Swachhta Kendra* and I4C are steps toward building capacity, but scaling these up is a challenge. On the US side, the rapid pace of innovation (IoT, 5G, AI) constantly opens new attack vectors faster than regulators can adapt. **Encryption and Privacy vs. Security:** A central policy tension in India is how to balance individual privacy against law enforcement needs. India's IT Act and recent Telecom Act empower the government to order decryption of communications in the name of national security. In 2021, regulations required social media companies to enable traceability of message "originators", effectively undermining end-to-end encryption. These measures are intended to help track cybercriminals, but they raise concerns among civil society and the tech industry. WhatsApp, for instance, has legally challenged the traceability mandate, warning that it effectively "breaks" encryption. The debate continues, but such policies clash with Western ideals of privacy and "tech-neutral" approaches [9]. The United States, by contrast, has its own "going dark" debate: law enforcement agencies sometimes argue that encryption hinders investigation of terrorism and major crimes, while tech companies defend strong privacy features. Thus, India-US dialogue must bridge different legal cultures on encryption.

Legal and Judicial Challenges: India's legal framework for cybercrime has seen updates (e.g. amendments to the IT Act, pending Personal Data Protection law, etc.), but enforcement remains difficult. For example, government data show that only about 30% of cybercrime complaints led to chargesheets in 2022, and over 90% of filed cases were still pending in courts. In major cities like Mumbai, conviction rates are low and backlog is high. The Moneycontrol analysis finds that chargesheeting rates for cybercrimes are significantly below those for ordinary crimes, indicating possible capacity bottlenecks or legal hurdles. Gathering electronic evidence itself can be complex: cybercrime often involves data stored on cloud services overseas, on encrypted devices, or on the dark web, complicating investigations. Extraditing cybercriminals is also cumbersome under existing Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) and conventions. These procedural delays allow many offenders to evade punishment.

Regulatory Gaps and Coordination: Cybersecurity in India involves multiple agencies (CERT-In, NCIIPC for critical infrastructure, I4C for crimes, NCSC for overall strategy), but coordination can be fragmented. The government has many initiatives (e.g. Cyber Crisis Management Plan, sectoral security audits, awareness campaigns) yet private-sector cooperation and public awareness remain uneven. Notably, until the recent Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, India lacked a comprehensive data privacy regime, which hindered cooperation on transborder data flows and trust in reporting fraud. Intermediary liability rules (IT Rules 2021) place security obligations on online platforms, but enforcement and clarity are still evolving. The US similarly struggles with regulatory consistency: debates over platform liability (Section 230), data protection standards across states, and divergence between federal agencies can slow a coherent response. For both countries, aligning private-sector incentives with national security (e.g. incentivizing rapid patching, zero-trust architectures) is an ongoing challenge. **Diplomatic and Normative Differences:** At the international level, India and the US broadly agree on preventing malicious cyber activity (e.g. critical infrastructure attacks, intellectual property theft). However, India often emphasizes "cyber sovereignty" – the right of states to enforce their own laws on data and networks – more strongly than the US. India traditionally resists external imposition of norms and insists that issues of censorship and monitoring remain domestic matters. In contrast, the US advocates a "free and open internet" model with minimal state control, aligned with its multistakeholder governance preference. While both sides commit to countering cybercrime, the path to broader norms can be contested. For example, India is not a party to the Council of Europe's Budapest Convention on cybercrime, preferring bilateral frameworks [10]. Reconciling these approaches requires diplomatic tact. In sum, the challenge is to bridge gaps: technical expertise must be scaled up, legal systems modernized, and diplomacy used to align priorities. The evolving India–US cyber partnership seeks to address many of these issues, as discussed next.

India–Us Cybersecurity Cooperation: Recognizing mutual interest, India and the United States have developed a framework of bilateral cooperation in cyber issues. This includes formal agreements, high-level dialogues, and joint initiatives that span law enforcement, infrastructure security, and norms. One landmark was the June 2016 **India-U.S. Framework for Cyber Relationship**. This inter-governmental agreement articulated shared principles: an open, interoperable cyberspace; internet as an engine of growth; and importantly, *closer cooperation among law enforcement agencies to combat cybercrime*. It committed both sides to share near-real-time threat information, conduct joint training in digital forensics, and develop capacity-building programs for electronic evidence gathering. The Framework also endorsed voluntary norms for state behavior (e.g. not to damage each other's critical infrastructure, to cooperate on cybercrime investigations). This 2016 deal laid the foundation for deeper cooperation, though its implementation has been incremental. More recently, India–US cyber coordination has intensified. During Prime Minister Modi's Washington visit in June 2023, the two leaders issued a **Joint Statement** reaffirming an *"open, secure, inclusive, safe, interoperable, and reliable Internet"* and pledging ongoing cooperation on cybersecurity issues. Specifically, they committed to share information about cyber threats and vulnerabilities, and to jointly investigate cyber incidents. This high-level declaration underscored cyber issues as a central pillar of the partnership. In parallel, specialised fora have been reactivated. The official India–US *Cyber Dialogue* (a foreign ministry track) and *Cybersecurity Working Group* (under the Defence and Commerce ministries) resumed meetings after a hiatus, focusing on topics like 5G security and critical infrastructure protection. On the law enforcement front, January 2025 saw the signing of a **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cybercrime investigations** [11]. Inked by India's Ambassador Vinay Kwatra and the U.S. Acting Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Kristie Canegallo, this MoU enables Indian and U.S. agencies to intensify training and information-sharing on *cyber threat intelligence and digital forensics* in criminal probes. Under the MoU, India's I4C (in the Home Ministry) will coordinate with U.S. Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and related agencies to implement joint operations. This agreement is significant: it moves beyond diplomacy into actionable collaboration on investigations.

Institutional and technical cooperation has also grown. In early 2024, the US Consulate in Mumbai helped launch the inaugural **U.S.–India Cybersecurity Initiative**, intended to facilitate workshops, tabletop exercises, and networking between American and Indian cybersecurity experts. That same year, a **U.S.–India Cybersecurity Center of Excellence** was established in Pune, modeled after similar centers in other countries. The Pune center aims to provide shared training facilities and research on cybersecurity best practices; as U.S. officials noted, "cyber issues are a priority in the US–India bilateral relationship" [12]. On the policy side, both countries have exchanged standards: India's National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) collaborated with the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to align on critical infrastructure protection and voluntarily adopted elements of the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) framework for its guidelines. Multilaterally, India and the US cooperate in forums like the G20, ASEAN Regional Forum, and the new India–US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue on Defence and Foreign Affairs. Cybersecurity is now a standard item on their agenda. For example, the 2024 2+2 Joint Statement (Defense/FMoD) explicitly "welcomed the recent and upcoming meetings of the India–U.S. Cyber Dialogue" and noted initiatives in countering ransomware and securing supply chains. Moreover, both participate in the International Counter Ransomware Initiative (CRI) led by the U.S., and the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace.

Table 2 summarizes key bilateral cyber agreements and initiatives between India and the US in recent years:

Year	Agreement/Initiative	Key Focus

2016	India-U.S. Cyber Framework	Shared principles (open internet); law enforcement collaboration and norms (incl. mutual assistance on cybercrime)
2023	India-U.S. Joint Leaders' Statement (June 2023)	Open, secure, interoperable internet; sharing cyber threat intel; joint incident response
2024	U.S.–India Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence	Capacity building: shared training, research
2024	U.S.–India Cybersecurity Initiative (Feb 2024)	Bilateral workshops, exercises on cyber defense
2025	MoU on Cybercrime Investigations (Jan 2025)	Enhanced cooperation on cyber threat intel & forensics

Table 2. Select India–US cybersecurity cooperation milestones.

Overall, India–US cyber cooperation today blends diplomatic, law-enforcement, and technical elements. Both sides recognize that linking their strengths (U.S. technology and intelligence, India's regional networks and talent) can yield mutual benefits. Yet this partnership is still evolving: new initiatives are often announced alongside broader technology dialogues, and concrete results (such as faster MLAT processing or joint cyber incident drills) are just beginning to emerge. The "way forward" should aim to institutionalize and expand these efforts.

Way Forward: Looking ahead, India and the United States should deepen and broaden their cooperation across multiple fronts. The guiding principle is a **balanced, multi-dimensional approach** that integrates technical solutions, legal frameworks, and diplomatic trust-building. The following recommendations outline key areas of focus: **Strengthen Joint Threat Intelligence and Incident Response:** Build on existing agreements to create real-time information-sharing platforms. For instance, India's CERT-In and the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) could establish a secured communication channel to exchange indicators of compromise (IOCs) and threat reports. Joint cyber exercises (red-team/blue-team drills) involving personnel from both countries can simulate attacks on critical infrastructure to improve preparedness. Expanding the role of the Cyber Center of Excellence in Pune to host international training and command-post exercises would institutionalize such exchanges. **Enhance Capacity-Building and Research Collaboration:** Both nations should invest in human capital. Scholarships and fellowship programs (e.g. student exchanges in cybersecurity curricula) can help address India's skills gap. Collaborative research on next-generation defenses—quantum encryption, AI-driven anomaly detection, blockchain for authentication—should be prioritized. Public–private partnerships, such as jointly funded labs or hackathons, would engage academia and industry in developing solutions tailored to the Indo-Pacific region's needs. The recently launched Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) provides a framework for co-financing R&D projects; cyber-related topics (5G security, secure software design) should be key pillars.

Harmonize Legal Instruments and Procedures: Streamlining mutual legal assistance is crucial. The 2025 MoU is a positive step, but further action is needed to expedite evidence gathering across borders. Both governments could negotiate a specialized India–US Cybercrime Convention, or at least an updated MLAT protocol focused on digital evidence, akin to a bilateral equivalent of the Budapest Convention. This might include pre-arranged procedures for preserving data, conducting live-forensics on seized devices, and rapid-response teams. On the domestic side, India's planned amendments to the IT Act and rules on data-sharing (to global law enforcement) should be calibrated to meet international best practices, balancing privacy (via its new Digital Personal Data Protection Act) with investigatory needs. Similarly, the US should encourage its technology companies to collaborate with Indian law enforcement when lawful requests are made. Training Indian police and prosecutors in the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) protocols (e.g. on digital evidence handling and cyber forensic laboratories) can raise effectiveness.

Secure Digital Infrastructure and Supply Chains: Both countries face threats from insecure technology components and 5G networks. Joint efforts to set security standards will build trust. For example, India's Bharat 6G Alliance and U.S. telecom entities should coordinate on testing and certifying equipment, following models like the Open RAN project launched in 2023. Collaborative "rip-and-replace" strategies, removing compromised foreign gear, can be aligned to avoid gaps in telecom coverage. More broadly, the US and India should harmonize regulations on emerging technologies (AI, IoT) to ensure that products comply with cybersecurity norms. Sharing best practices for securing smart cities and critical infrastructure (water, power, transportation) – possibly through a joint task force – would further improve resilience.

Advance International Cyber Norms and Multilateral Cooperation: India and the US should leverage their partnership to shape global cyber norms. This includes continuing engagement in the UN Open-Ended Working Groups (OEWG) and Groups of Governmental Experts (GGE) on information security, where both have roles. They can jointly advocate for norms against cyber-enabled espionage of civilian data, or suppression of cyber operations targeting allied democracies. Within forums like the G20 and ASEAN, India and the US can coordinate to elevate cybersecurity on the agenda (for example, the US supporting India's Digital Public Infrastructure initiatives). They should also expand cooperation to regional allies: under the Quad framework, trilateral exercises with Japan and Australia on maritime cybersecurity have been proposed.

Focus on Societal Resilience and Public Awareness: Cybersecurity is not purely a government problem. Both countries need public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about scams and hygiene. Lessons can be shared: India's "1930" helpline for cyber fraud, which helped recover part of stolen funds, can be modeled or integrated with U.S. initiatives like the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) [13]. Information-sharing with financial regulators (RBI, Fintech startups, banks) should be enhanced bilaterally to detect mule accounts and money laundering tied to cybercrime. Finally, both democracies must ensure that counter-cybercrime measures respect civil liberties: promoting transparency and accountability (e.g. oversight of surveillance orders) will bolster public trust. The United States, with its robust data protection laws, can advise India on building legal safeguards around cyber investigations Cybercrime Complaints in India (2019–2023). The rapid rise in reported cybercrimes is illustrated in Table 3. This trend underscores the urgency of bolstered defenses and cooperation.

Year	Cybercrime Complaints (NCRP)
2019	26,049
2020	257,777
2021	452,414
2022	966,790
2023	1,556,218

Table 3. Number of cybercrime complaints reported in India each year (2019–2023).

In summary, the India–US cyber partnership should evolve from high-level statements to concrete projects. Both sides must invest in capacity (people, processes, technology) and institutionalize collaboration channels. For example, annual joint cyber risk assessments or co-authored cybersecurity publications could generate mutual awareness. Private-sector linkages are also vital: encouraging American and Indian tech firms to align security practices (through joint standards bodies or industry consortiums) can reinforce the public initiatives.

Conclusion: In an interconnected world, cybersecurity and cybercrime transcend borders. India and the United States, as major digital powers and strategic partners, have both the need and opportunity to tackle these issues together. This paper has shown that India's cybercrime problem is severe and growing, straining law enforcement and societal trust. Simultaneously, its rapid digitalization and role as a rising ICT hub make robust cybersecurity a national priority. The United States, with its technological edge and global reach, stands to benefit by helping secure a key partner's networks, while also protecting its own citizens from threats emanating in South Asia. The India–US cyber agenda must therefore be **multifaceted**: it requires advancing technology and capacity on one hand, and harmonizing laws and norms on the other. The existing frameworks — from the 2016 Cyber Framework to the new 2025 law enforcement MoU — provide a policy foundation. The challenge now is implementation and expansion. Greater sharing of cyber threat intelligence, joint training programs, and harmonized legal procedures will yield practical results. At the same time, mutual understanding of differing views on privacy, internet governance, and cyber norms will ensure the partnership is based on realistic expectations.

Looking forward, strong India–US cyber cooperation can have regional and global positive spillovers. It can set standards in the Indo-Pacific, bolster global supply chain security, and contribute to stable digital commerce. It can also reinforce each country's own development: for India, secure digital infrastructure is key to economic growth and e-governance; for the US, working with India helps build a global front against cyber malefactors. In sum, the "way forward" lies in deepening a **whole-of-society** partnership—government, industry, academia, and civil society—underpinned by the mutual values of an open society and the shared understanding that cyberspace must be made secure for everyone.

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